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**SEARCHING FOR MEANING: CAPITALISM, DEGROWTH AND INDIGENOUS
TRADITIONS. LEARNING FROM THE ULCHI**

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To Mother Earth

Abstract

This PhD thesis explores how narratives about the meaning of human life are linked to economic theory and practice, and ecological values. The topic is addressed from three perspectives: capitalism, degrowth and Indigenous knowledge systems. For this purpose, first, the thesis gives an overview of how dominant Western philosophical narratives about meaningfulness manifest in the capitalist theory and practice, particularly in the ideas of economic development and growth, and in consumerism. Second, drawing on literature and a survey conducted in the degrowth community, the thesis analyses how degrowth as an anti-capitalist political project challenges the capitalist framings of meaningfulness and offers alternative visions rooted in the ideas of a good life for all, collectivity and collective wasteful activities (*dépense*). Third, based on the works of Indigenous authors, the kincentric worldview and the alternative framings about human life and meaningfulness that are rooted in it are discussed, emphasising the non-anthropocentrism and land-based focus of such framings. Fourth, based on ethnographic work, the thesis explores how this kincentric understanding of human life is present in the culture, and spiritual and economic practices of the Ulchi Nation, in particular, in the concept of *буйу удэны* and the principle of self-limitation. Finally, the thesis summarises the findings, emphasising the differences and similarities between the capitalist, degrowth and kincentric framings of meaningfulness, and discusses how the kincentric worldview can offer paths towards further and ontologically rooted radicalisation of the theory and project of degrowth through the concepts of an ecological self, spiritual environmentalism and spiritual localism, relational economy and radical spirituality.

Riassunto

Questa tesi di dottorato esplora come le narrazioni sul significato della vita umana siano collegate alla teoria e alla pratica economica, e ai valori ecologici. L'argomento è affrontato da tre prospettive: capitalismo, decrescita e sistemi di conoscenza indigeni. A tal fine, la tesi fornisce innanzitutto una panoramica su come le narrazioni filosofiche dominanti occidentali riguardanti il significato della vita si manifestano nella teoria e nella pratica capitalista, in particolare nelle idee di sviluppo economico e crescita, e nel consumismo. In secondo luogo, attingendo alla letteratura e a un sondaggio condotto nella comunità della decrescita, la tesi analizza come la decrescita, come progetto politico anti-capitalista, sfida le costruzioni capitaliste del significato della vita e offre visioni alternative radicate nelle idee di una vita buona per tutti, collettività e attività collettive dissipative (*dépense*). In terzo luogo, sulla base delle opere di autori indigeni, vengono discussi la visione del mondo kinentrica e le costruzioni alternative della vita umana e del significato della vita che vi sono radicate, sottolineando l'assenza di antropocentrismo e l'orientamento territoriale di tali costruzioni. In quarto luogo, sulla base di lavori etnografici, la tesi esplora come questa comprensione kinentrica della vita umana sia presente nella cultura, nelle pratiche spirituali ed economiche della Nazione Ulchi, in particolare nel concetto di *быву удэны* e nel principio di auto-limitazione. Infine, la tesi riassume i risultati, enfatizzando le differenze e le somiglianze tra le costruzioni capitaliste, della decrescita e kinentriche del significato, e discute come la visione del mondo kinentrica possa offrire percorsi verso una radicalizzazione ulteriore e ontologicamente radicata della teoria e del progetto della decrescita attraverso i concetti di sé ecologico, ambientalismo spirituale e localismo spirituale, economia relazionale e spiritualità radicale.

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INTRODUCTION

“Imagine a world where the need for meaning no longer occurs; a world where we no longer seek deeper and larger purposes for our existence and no longer suffer anxiety and despair in the absence of them. Could such a world be possible?” [Casey, 2004: 71]. The search for meaning has occupied a special place in Western cultures, to the point that for many, as this quote suggests, it is difficult to imagine a reality where humans are not looking for meaning. The quote also indicates that the search for meaning goes hand-in-hand with the issue of meaninglessness. As Blocker [1974: 73] pointed out, there is irony in the fact that a sense of meaninglessness is an outcome of the search for meaning itself: “the search for meaning has led and must lead to a sense of meaninglessness”. While a number of thinkers saw this existential anxiety associated with the quest for meaning as nothing abnormal, as a natural element of the human condition that one needs to learn to adjust to [Ruffin, 1984], research shows that many struggle to do so, which has drastic consequences for their well-being and mental health and can even increase the risk of suicidal ideation [Schnell et al., 2018; Vötter, 2019; Li et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2023]. This struggle with the lack of meaning or purpose, which became particularly acute in the 20th century and has been depicted in numerous texts and works of art (e.g., *Waiting for Godot*, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, *Star Trek*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*), has been described as a crisis of meaning [Pattakos, 2017].

In this PhD project, I seek to contribute to the body of literature on the topic of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in contemporary Western cultures by situating the question within the context of the Western worldview, and then looking at it critically through the lens of the kincentric worldview rooted in the principle of relationality as manifested in Indigenous cultures. By applying such an ontological and epistemological lens to the question of life’s meaning, I am hoping to add new layers to the existing reflections on the question and potentially highlight new (or old?) answers to it. Furthermore, this project also seeks to emphasise the ecological, economic and political dimensions of the question by exploring how conceptualisations of meaningfulness are linked to economic practices and ecological relationality. Eventually, through the issue of meaningfulness and its connections to the topic of living a good life and understanding the place of the human in this world, I am seeking to find ways to bring together the Indigenous and degrowth perspectives on economics and ecological relations. Combined, these two perspectives could offer a foundation for a truly radical and

ontologically rooted critique of growth-oriented capitalism and offer paths for a transition to a more sustainable and equitable socioeconomic system.

Such a research focus originates from my involvement with the international degrowth movement, and has been shaped by degrowth literature and exchanges with degrowth scholars and activists. In its preliminary shape, the idea first emerged in 2018, when as a junior research fellow at the Institute for Political Ecology in Zagreb, I was guided by my supervisor Mladen Domazet to read the book *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* [D'Alisa et al., 2014]. One chapter in the book particularly captured my attention. In that chapter, Onofrio Romano unpacked the concept of *dépense*, or, unproductive expenditure, that him and a few other degrowth authors, drawing on the works of 20th-century French thinker George Bataille, applied to degrowth as a way to slow down capitalist growth. *Dépense* is probably the most mystical concept that one can find in degrowth literature. It brings together the issues of economic abundance, energy flows, waste, sovereignty, sacrifice and many other topics that are rarely brought up in economic literature. Inevitably, it also touches on the topic of meaningfulness.

However, an earlier research project that I carried out on the concept of *dépense* [Lopatina, 2020] highlighted that some fundamental biases originating from the Western worldview can be traced in the degrowth framing of *dépense*. Some of them had to do with the question of meaningfulness and originated from Bataille's [1988] understanding of sovereignty. That realisation emphasised the importance of applying a decolonial approach to reflections on the topic of meaningfulness from the degrowth perspective, which pushed me to engage with literature on the Indigenous worldview and, eventually, to working with the Ulchi people.

Thus, the theoretical framework and structure of this research project reflect the evolution of my investigations into degrowth and, more specifically, the topic of meaningfulness from the degrowth perspective, starting with what degrowth seeks to critique in capitalism and finishing with a critique of gaps in degrowth theory on this and other related topics, such as anthropocentrism and spirituality. What this thesis ultimately seeks to contribute to literature is a reflection on the question of life's meaning from a critical socio-ecological perspective that is rooted in both degrowth theory and a decolonial approach informed by Indigenous worldviews. In a broader sense, this project can be seen as an attempt to build bridges from Western environmentalism, as manifested in degrowth, towards the

kincentric worldview, i.e., as one of the attempts of the Western worldview to decolonise itself.

This PhD project has two main audiences. The information collected during the fieldwork with the Ulchi Nation and discussed in Chapter 4 is, first of all, aimed at the Ulchi community. This information is included in the thesis with the approval of the members of the community who participated in the study. The data will be further elaborated, analysed and published as a standalone text in Russian for the use of the community. On the other hand, the general reflections on the topic of meaningfulness are meant, first of all, as a contribution to degrowth literature and to the efforts of the degrowth community to decolonise the social imaginary and itself. This project is an attempt to do so through learning from the kincentric worldview and particularly from the Ulchi culture. What the analysis presented here essentially does is translating Indigenous knowledges into terms that can be understood by a Western audience in order to start shifting the dominant narratives about human life. Many Indigenous thinkers from across the globe have done the important work of highlighting the differences between the Western and Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Now, it is the time for critical Western theories that seek to create more sustainable and ethical futures, including degrowth, to find ways to integrate those knowledges into their theoretical frameworks and put them into practice.

It is important to point out, however, that in the process of learning from Indigenous knowledge systems, concepts may be used in ways that help the Western audience understand the kincentric worldview better, but do not necessarily represent the latter in its full complexity. For example, the question of life's meaning, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, is a product of Western ontology and does not have the same validity in the context of Indigenous cultures. The same applies to the term 'spirituality'. As discussed in Chapter 5, embracing the spirituality rooted in the kincentric worldview and relationality can be one of the critical elements for finding new (or, rediscovering old ones) sources of meaningfulness. The issue of spirituality is also important given a connection existing between the growing popularity of eco-spirituality and environmentalism, as has been highlighted in literature [Koehrsen, 2022]. However, while often referring to Indigenous spirituality and defining spirituality as a distinctive characteristic of the kincentric worldview, Indigenous authors tend to avoid giving clear-cut definitions to the term, instead giving more fluid descriptions based on some key elements. For example, Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 111] write: "...there exists no term from Westernised

scholarship that can cover the deep, place-based, reciprocal, relational, sacred, loving individuality that is the nature of the dynamic, living world. It is an Indigenous spirituality". Moreover, the use of the term 'spiritual' in such a context has also been problematised on the grounds that the discourse of 'Indigenous spirituality' "belongs to the hegemonic discourse of the international elite" [Kraft, 2009: 201] and was primarily developed through the UN and international law [ibid.], therefore, to a great extent, in disconnection from Indigenous Peoples. Thus, when doing this work of translating and learning from Indigenous knowledges, it is important to be aware of the complexity of the use of such concepts as spirituality and the meaning of life, and also of the fact that the English language very often fails to represent the values of Indigenous Peoples accurately (as is further discussed in Chapter 3). In this thesis, drawing on texts by Indigenous authors reflecting on the Indigenous worldview, spirituality is understood as living in and through relationality with all beings living on planet Earth as well as beyond it.

Research questions

This research project aims to address the existing gap in literature on the ecological-economic dimensions of the question of meaningfulness by exploring how various framings of the concept of the meaning of life weave into larger collective imaginaries that underpin socioeconomic systems and their (un)sustainability. The three overarching research questions addressed in this thesis are:

- (1) How do specific conceptualisations of the meaning of human life manifest in economic theories and contribute to sustainable and unsustainable economic practices?
- (2) How do economic practices shape interpretations of the question of life's meaning?
- (3) What framings of meaningfulness can help meet the Western urge for meaning in ways that do not reproduce the economic growth orientation of capitalism and that are more sustainable and convivial?

Addressing these larger questions involves answering the following sub-questions:

- (1) What interpretations and conceptual framings of the meaning of human life exist in the capitalist imaginary?

- (2) What interpretations and conceptual framings of the meaning of human life exist in degrowth thought?
- (3) What interpretations and conceptual framings of the meaning of human life have been discussed in Indigenous literature?
- (4) What interpretations and conceptual framings of the meaning of human life exist in the Ulchi culture?
- (5) What are the differences and similarities between the capitalist, degrowth and kincentric interpretations of the meaning of human life?
- (6) How do these interpretations relate to perpetuating or challenging the growth-oriented capitalist paradigm?
- (7) How could framings of meaningfulness existing in Indigenous cultures, particularly, in the Ulchi culture, enrich degrowth thought?

Research design

Aiming to address the above research questions, this project explores the ecological-economic dimensions of the topic of meaningfulness from three perspectives: capitalism, degrowth and Indigenous worldviews. Correspondingly, the research design reflects this three-pronged focus. It, first, looks at the topic of meaningfulness in the context of the capitalist imaginary, followed by an analysis of degrowth theory and movement. Then, it explores Indigenous literature and the Ulchi worldview. In order to explore these three perspectives, the project employs mixed methods and is structured as follows:

- (1) **Capitalist narratives:** Narrative literature review and discourse analysis of the 20th and 21st century anglophone literature on the topic of the meaning of life, and specifically on meaningfulness and capitalism.
- (2) **Degrowth narratives:** 1) Narrative literature review and discourse analysis of degrowth literature to identify explicit and implicit narratives about meaningfulness. 2) Survey on the degrowth narratives of a good life.
- (3) **Indigenous narratives:** Narrative review and discourse analysis of literature on the Indigenous worldview in English.
- (4) **Ulchi narratives:** 1) Narrative review of literature on the Ulchi culture. 2) Interviews-conversations with members of the Ulchi community and participant observation.

- (5) **Synthesis:** Findings of the literature review, discourse analysis, survey and fieldwork are synthesised to explore the differences between the Western and Indigenous framings of meaningfulness, highlighting the framings that are non-anthropocentric and relational.

Thus, the present project relies on a few research methods and sources of data collection in order to capture the different levels of beliefs around the topic of meaningfulness. Additionally, elements of autoethnography are used in the analysis of the kincentric worldview (Chapter 3) as part of the reflection on the ontological and epistemological differences between the Western and the kincentric worldviews. The intricacies of making such comparisons are discussed in Chapter 3.

Structure of the thesis

Reflecting the research design described above, the present thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 1 explores the emergence and evolution of the question of life's meaning in the Western philosophical and theological tradition, and seeks to make connections between the philosophical debates and the economic domain.

Chapter 2 offers an overview of degrowth as a political project and movement, focusing on how it challenges the true-world and individualised narratives of meaningfulness that are engrained in the capitalist imaginary. The chapter also summarises some key findings of a survey on the narratives of a good life that was conducted in the degrowth community.

Chapter 3 summarises Indigenous literature on the kincentric worldview, emphasising the critique of the Western worldview and capitalism. It also addresses the narratives of meaningfulness that can be traced in literature on the Indigenous ways of being, which is in essence land-based. The chapter also discusses some key principles of engaging with and learning from Indigenous knowledge systems.

Chapter 4 gives an overview of the methodological approach that I followed while working with the Ulchi community and the methods applied. It describes the history of the Ulchi

Nation and the Ulchi worldview, exploring the concept of *бүгү үдэны* as related to the question of meaningfulness as well as to the ecological framings of a good life.

Chapter 5 summarises the findings presented in the previous chapters, exploring the aspects of thinking about meaningfulness and, more broadly, of ecological thinking rooted in the kincentric worldview that could enrich the degrowth critique of capitalism. It offers an analysis of connections existing between the kincentric framings of meaningfulness with the perceptions of the human relationship with the land, framings of the self and of localism, as well as with economic theory and practice, and spirituality.

CHAPTER 1. Why meaning of life?

Does anybody know what we are living for?

Queen, "The Show Must Go On"

For those who believe in God, most of the big questions are answered. But for those of us who can't readily accept the God formula, the big answers don't remain stone-written.

Charles Bukowski

This chapter explores the emergence and evolution of the question of life's meaning in the Western philosophical tradition, and seeks to make connections between the philosophical debates and the economic domain. Section 1.1 gives an overview of the key narratives on the topic in Western philosophical and religious thought, while section 1.2 summarises the changes that have been happening in the meaningfulness debates in the 20th and 21st centuries. In sections 1.3 and 1.4, I look at the manifestations of the dominant Western narratives about meaningfulness in the economic domain, specifically, in the growth-oriented capitalist system.

1.1 Search for meaning

What is the place of the human in this world? Are we part of nature? Are we like other animals? Or, are we different? If so, why are we different? Are we unique? What is the meaning behind this? Is there a special purpose for humans to exist for?

Such and similar questions have been pondered over by generations of thinkers reflecting on the human condition [Arendt, 1958; Pepperell, 2003; Chakrabarty, 2015]. Many thinkers have seen humans as existing in some sort of an interspace between an animal and something else, often separate from other animals and not quite belonging to nature [Challenger, 2021]. Often, this kind of reflections about the human condition have been associated with an inner existential discomfort that spurs such questions and that this intellectual quest seeks to find a soothing medicine for.

Also often, this search for answers is linked to the idea of human exceptionalism. Whether it is rationality, consciousness, soul or something else that is the extra characteristic that humans possess and that makes us distinct from other animals, the place that humans occupy in this world has been seen as unique in many cultures across continents and throughout centuries. As Melanie Challenger puts it in her book *How to be animal: A new history of what it means to be human* [2021: 3], “we have spent much of human history asserting that human experience has a meaning and value that is lacking in the rigid lives of other animals”. However, an important question to pose here is who is this *we*? Is there a *we*? People all around the world have narrated stories, sang songs, carved wood and painted walls of caves and canvases, giving their interpretations to the enigma of human existence. However, in different cultures, this has been done in different forms and with different approaches. And the way these questions about the human condition have been addressed in the Western tradition is rather unique.

In Western thought, over centuries of philosophising, this search for the place of the human race in the world has taken on the form of the search for meaning. While the topics of meaningfulness and life’s purpose have been addressed in non-Western cultures as well, in Western thought, the question of life’s meaning has claimed a central place in philosophy, also taking on an important role in art and people’s everyday lives. In the history of Western thought, the question has been regarded by many thinkers as the most fundamental and important question in human existence. For example, the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who developed a school of psychotherapy centred on the pursuit of meaning, believed this concern with the meaning of life to be “the truest expression of the state of being human” [quoted in Klemke & Cahn, 2008: xi]. And for Martin Heidegger [1962], it was exactly this ability to question one’s own existence that distinguishes humans from animals.

Although today the expression the ‘meaning of life’ is deeply embedded in the culture and seems very familiar to us, this particular framing of the topic of the human condition is a rather recent invention of Western thought [Leach & Tartaglia, 2018; Martela, 2019]. For millennia thinkers used other framings of the question of the meaning and purpose of human life, without using that particular expression. For example, in his “You forget that creation is not for your benefit; you exist for the sake of the universe” [Laws, 903b-c], Plato did not need to use the word ‘meaning’ for us to connect this statement with the question of the meaning of life.

Overall, the question of life's meaning as we would frame it today is not always easy to discern in philosophical thought due to the wide range of other overlapping notions and terms that have been used in literature [Leach & Tartaglia, 2018]. For example, in ancient Greek philosophy, the main lens used for thinking about human life was the notion of a 'good life' and defining the ways for a person (usually, a wealthy man) to live that life [Eagleton, 2007; Rabbås et al., 2015; Gaukroger, 2020]. While the specific framings of the notion depended on the historical context, achieving happiness and well-being were considered the ultimate aims of philosophy in its classical period [Gaukroger, 2020].

With the rise of Christianity, however, the focus shifted from the questions of well-being to the relationship with God [Gaukroger, 2020]. In his analysis of the failures of Western philosophy, Gaukroger [2020] argues that one of the reasons why Christianity eclipsed ancient philosophy was the greater appeal of the Christian conceptualisation of a good life. First of all, Christian theology provided non-philosophical tools for addressing the fundamental questions about human life, and a different way of thinking in general that was based on contemplation rather than philosophical enquiry [ibid.]. Furthermore, by rooting its moral vision in communal living, the idea of salvation and eternal life, Christianity offered an alternative to the more intellectualised (and, hence, elitist) and individualistic paths to a good life that Greek philosophy offered, making it both more accessible and more appealing to a broader spectrum of social groups [Brown, 1989; Rousseau, 1999; Dunn, 1998]. Thus, Christian God and His Law became and remained the answers to the question of meaning in Western thought for centuries. Although, it was not really a question at the time, it was a 'non-issue' [Young, 2014], given the obvious availability of an answer that God is the source of meaning.

However, later on, the scientific discoveries, starting with the Copernican Revolution in astronomy in the 16th century, shook the meaning-creation structure that Christianity constructed. Philosophers started to question the place of humans in the universe and God's role in its functioning [Young, 2014]. It is when the Church started losing its power over European minds and public belief in the precepts of Christianity started to diminish, and eventually Nietzsche announced the death of God in *The Gay Science* [1974, originally published in 1882], that the question of meaning became an actual question.

However, at the same time, even upon the eventual decline of religious belief in the West, the question of God and his existence remained a major variable in shaping Western thought on the topic of meaningfulness. The question of God's existence is what separates supernaturalists, who claim that some spiritual conditions such as God or a soul are necessary for life to be meaningful, from naturalists who disagree with the claim [Metz, 2019]. Therefore, even in the atheistic interpretations of the question, God commonly remains the starting point of philosophising on the matter.

Talking about the expression 'meaning of life' itself, while it is very familiar to us today, it became widespread rather recently, only in the 19th century [Leach & Tartaglia, 2018]. Leach and Tartaglia trace the origins of the notion to the Jena Romantics, including Johann Gottlieb Fichte and his students, among which the German version of the term — 'Der Sinn des Lebens' — first appeared. It is believed that poet Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg, more known as Novalis, was the first one to use the expression in an unpublished manuscript in 1797–1798. Later on, it appeared in Schlegel's *Lucinde* [1799] and was also picked up by Fichte and others [Leach & Tartaglia, 2018]. Inspired by Schlegel's work, Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle was the first one to translate the German expression into English in his 1831 novel *Sartor Resartus* [ibid.]. From there, the phrase 'meaning of life' spread far and wide, taking the central stage in the questioning of human existence in the Western philosophical tradition.

The Romantics were responsible not only for coining the term but also for at least two other critical contributions to the meaning-of-life debates that continue to shape Western thinking on the matter also today. These two contributions are particularly important from the point of view of the present work, namely, the exploration of the connection between the dominant Western framings of the topic of meaningfulness and economic theory and practice. The first of these two contributions is the idea that, to truly live, one has to experience life as highly meaningful, otherwise it has no value. As Martela [2019] argues, at the root of the modern problem of an existential crisis lies this idea that life *has* to be meaningful. The Romantics believed that everyone is promised a life full of meaning. One simply needs to discover it and then pieces of the puzzle will fall into place for a happy and fulfilled life.

The second contribution made by the Romantics was turning inwards in order to find answers to the question of life's meaning, the idea that meaning is to be created by an

individual themselves¹ as an outcome of self-inspection and of unleashing individual creativity [Leach & Tartaglia, 2018]. As Novalis put it, “[o]nly an artist can divine the meaning of life” [quoted in Leach & Tartaglia, 2018]. As will be discussed below, this idea was picked up by a number of European thinkers, and remains present in the meaningfulness debates also today. Furthermore, some critics have located the source of European nihilism exactly with the Romantics’ idea that human will can create the reality [Gillespie, 1995; Leach & Tartaglia, 2018].

Interestingly, the way the Romantics framed the idea of the meaning of life was a response to the French Enlightenment with its rationalism, materialism and universalism [Leach & Tartaglia, 2018; Martela, 2019]. The idealism of the Romantics with its notion of the meaning of life sought to challenge the disenchanted worldview materialism was creating. Another, although later, response to the changing values and the loss of Christian belief in Europe was existentialism, which picked up and further developed the Romantics’ idea of meaning as created by an individual, accentuating the need to choose oneself in the world and one’s existence [Sartre, 2007]. The idea was that, since there is no God to make choices for us, we have to make our own choices [Young, 2014]. This need to choose has been associated with the idea of individual freedom, but also with anxiety or anguish: “My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation” [Sartre, 1956: 38]. This anguish associated with the search for meaning persists in the Western culture also today, including the popular culture.

In Western philosophy, following the death of God, as announced by Nietzsche, another secular response to the question of meaning has been to deny the question altogether as no such thing as the meaning of (human) life can exist, i.e., that life as such is meaningless [Young, 2014; Metz, 2019]. As a result, in the 20th century the question lost its power in the philosophical debates. However, in the past couple of decades, the question of life’s meaning made a comeback into Western thought and literature, to a great extent due to the work of Susan Wolf and Thaddeus Metz [Leach & Tartaglia, 2018], both of whom offered pluralistic accounts of meaningfulness balancing both subjective fulfilment (i.e., subjective perception of life as meaningful) and objective value (i.e., parameters that can be judged as objectively meaningful, for example, contributing to projects that connect one’s life to something greater) [Wolf, 2010; Metz, 2013]. Thus, at

¹ In this text, they/them/themselves are used as gender-neutral pronouns.

the turn of the century, the dominant take on the question, took a new shape, inspired both by the Romanticism and rationalism, as will be discussed in the next section.

1.2 Not (so much) a philosophical question anymore

When religious belief in Europe went into decline during the 18th and 19th centuries, and Christianity's answers to the fundamental questions of human existence began to fail, while at the same time the question of life's meaning had been placed on the map of philosophical thought by the Romantics, thinkers started wondering: if there is no God and, hence, no meaning or purpose assigned to human life by a supernatural being, does it mean that there can be no meaning in human life at all? For some schools of thought, including nihilism, absurdism and some strands of existentialism, the inability to replace the old collective theistic narratives with another objective meaning or purpose was associated with ontological anxiety and existential anguish, as was mentioned above, resulting in seeing human life as pointless and superfluous [Eagleton, 2007]. At the same time, other thinkers, including some existentialists (e.g., Sartre) and later on Wolf and Metz, giving a continuation to the ideas of individually created meaning as originating from the Romanticism, found another way to get out of this meaninglessness dead-end — by reframing and downscaling the question. Thus, since faith in grand (first of all, religious, but not only, as we will see soon) narratives of meaningfulness was lost and it was assumed that no shared meaning of (human) life can exist, and therefore, it makes no sense to look for *the* meaning of human life, the query was moved into the sphere of the personal, of finding or creating meaning or purpose in each individual life by the individual themselves and on their own [Goldman, 2019; Martela, 2019]. Thus, the question changed to: if there is no meaning of human life, how can meaning be created and enacted by an individual themselves? If the Romantics signalled this shift at the end of the 18th century, it entered the debates on life's meaning only later on, in the 20th century, and spread widely in the 21st century.

This change of perspective has also manifested in the language, shifting away from the search for the 'meaning of life' towards creating a 'meaning in life'.² Conceptually, this suggests moving away from a collective grand meaning that needs to be discovered to

² Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl [1984] was one of the first authors to use the term 'meaning in life' and his work was particularly influential in its popularisation.

more low-scale, down-to-earth meanings that are to be created based on the individual's own needs and preferences. In this sense, the notion 'meaning in life' is understood today in terms very close to the idea the Romantics intended for their notion of the 'meaning of life'. On the other hand, in today's literature, the term 'meaning of life' is mainly used to refer to the grand collective narratives, such as of the purpose of human life as understood in Christianity [Leach & Tartaglia, 2018]. However, as Leach and Tartaglia [2018] suggest, there is a significant difference between the original Romantic idea and the current meaning behind the notion of the 'meaning in life', namely, the absence of a metaphysical dimension and the dominance of materialism in the latter. To the Romantics, one's search for the meaning of life was supposed to align with the divine will [ibid.]. Today, on the contrary, the dominant secular understanding of the question of meaning is confined to the personal search for a meaning or meanings, in disconnection from metaphysical considerations that go beyond the material reality. Leach and Tartaglia place the responsibility for this abandonment of the metaphysics in the question of meaningfulness with the humanism's materialism that emphasised the human experience in meaning-creation [ibid.].

What this means is that, while some thinkers today are still reflecting on the question of life's meaning in the classical terms of collective grand narratives, which, however, primarily happens within the theological domain [Metz, 2019], the predominant focus in Western thought has shifted. As Metz [2019: 3] puts it, "[t]he dominant view amongst twenty-first-century English-speaking philosophers about the concept of life's meaning [...] is that it is a variable final value that is usefully distinguished from other final values such as happiness and morality". Thus, with the individualisation of meaning, meaningfulness is now seen among other intrinsic elements of a good life, such as happiness, pleasure and well-being [Goldman, 2019].

This way, traditionally belonging to the field of philosophy, the question of meaningfulness expanded beyond it, creating a place for itself also in the field of psychology, which now looks for recipes that could help individuals (population in general or more specific groups, such as terminally ill patients) find meaning in life, and this way improve the quality of their life. One of the reasons behind the growing interest in the issue of meaning in psychology has been the research on the health benefits of personal meaning [Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000]. Today, while the 'new' individual-focused and more down-to-earth framing of the concept of meaningfulness is being refined [Martela & Steger, 2015],

psychologists are also looking for the best ways to measure subjective experiences of meaning in life, with a range of metrics and scales having been put forward for this purpose. Some of them include the Meaningful Life Measure (MLM) [Morgan & Farsides, 2009], the 3IML (three indicators of meaning in life scale) [Shuv-Ami & Bareket-Bojmel, 2021], the Meaning and Purpose Scales (MAPS) [Schnell & Danbolt, 2023] and the Comprehensive Meaning Measure [Hanson & VanderWeele, 2019]. Furthermore, meaningfulness is even being included in national metrics of well-being [Lelkes, 2021]. At the same time, even though meaningfulness is generally distinguished from other aspects of a good life [Goldman, 2019], the term 'meaningful life' can be sometimes seen used as synonymous of a 'good life', 'flourishing life', 'life well lived' and other similar expressions denoting the ideal of a human life [e.g., Lelkes, 2021], without separating these concepts clearly.

Thus, in today's literature on the topic, it is possible to find a very strong association between the notions of the meaning in life and the good life, and the former tends to be understood as an intrinsic element of the latter. However, despite the return of the question of life's meaning into philosophy in the past few decades [Leach and Tartaglia, 2018], and a growing body of literature studying the question, the topic has seen a major trivialisation and instrumentalization. Today in mainstream Western thought, it is mainly addressed from a more pragmatic perspective, void of the spiritual or metaphysical dimensions that historically characterised these debates, with a focus on more down-to-earth sources of meaningfulness, locking it within the responsibility of the individual. The increasingly psychological approach to the question of life's meaning proves the failure of both religion and philosophy in the Western context to provide sustainable narratives around the topic (although it should not be denied that such debates still continue [Metz, 2019]). Nonetheless, despite this ongoing rationalisation of the question of meaning and its loss of the transcendental aspect, the continuing and never-ceasing interest in the topic, both in scientific literature and popular culture [Leach and Tartaglia, 2018], indicates the importance of the concept to the Western mind. Thus, the rationalisation of meaningfulness does not suggest the end of the search for meaning. The search has not stopped, it continues although in a different form, and also in different places, including the economic domain.

1.3 Meaning in economics

Most Western philosophers today would argue that the days of grand narratives about the meaning or purpose of human life are long gone and we should not talk any longer about the meaning of human life [Metz, 2019]. But if we look beyond the philosophical domain, do such grand narratives persist in any other sphere or field of thought? Particularly, in economics?

Philosophy has often failed to make connections with the economic domain of human functioning and to include economic relations in its considerations. This is particularly visible in the case of the topic of the meaning of life. Traditionally, the question of meaning has been considered to be a purely philosophical one. For example, Leach and Tartaglia [2018: x] insist that “although many different kinds of people are interested, and many can bring valuable insights to the matter [of the meaning of life], if there is one particular walk of life from which you would expect to hear some especially strong answers, it is philosophy”. As mentioned earlier, one of the main lenses in the Western debates on the meaning of/in life has been the religious belief or the lack thereof. On the contrary, economic considerations and power relations (whether material or intellectual) underlying economic systems have been predominantly overlooked in the philosophical reflections on the topic of life’s meaning. Likewise, in economic studies, the question of meaningfulness is rarely looked at either and tends to be dismissed as too philosophical. As Karl Marx [cited in Young, 2014: 103] said: “Philosophers have only sought to understand the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it”. Making this connection between the philosophical and the practical, however, seems critical for understanding, and eventually changing, the principles of functioning of the capitalist system.

Some important exceptions that connected economic aspects with the considerations of the meaning of/in life, even if not necessarily explicitly, include Karl Marx’s theory of historical materialism [2018], and Max Weber’s analysis of the Protestant ethic, especially of the Calvinist ideas of predestination and calling, in shaping modern capitalism [1958]. A less known philosophical work, which, however, also offers an interesting contribution to the reflection on the meaning of human life from the economic point of view is George Bataille’s theory of the general economy and its connection to human sovereignty [1988] (which will be explored in Chapter 2).

Amy Wendling in the chapter *Marx and the meaning of life* [in Leach & Tartaglia (eds.), 2018] argues that Marx's thought has critical implications for understanding the meaning of human life via his reflections on human suffering and its place in the functioning of capitalism. Wendling points out that Marx critiqued one of the ruling ideas underlying capitalism, namely, the idea that being human means suffering, which in its turn relies on the idea of undifferentiated suffering and has its roots in the Judeo-Christian notion that suffering is a path towards redemption. As Wendling puts it [ibid.: 172], identifying human life with suffering "paves the way for definitions of nature and human nature that extend the capitalist project", i.e., it justifies the suffering that capitalism relies on as a system. Thus, Marx asserts that capitalism relies on an ontology of the human, according to which to be human means to suffer [ibid.]. Interestingly, as Wendling points out, Marx himself struggles with fully overturning the Judeo-Christian narrative of suffering-redemption that capitalism relies on. While Marx's theory critiques the sufferings experienced by the working class for the sake of wealth creation, by highlighting the role of the revolution, i.e., redemption in a secular disguise, Marx, as Wendling argues, also failed to challenge the idea of teleological suffering, and, more broadly, of the teleological narrative underlying Christianity.

Another analysis of the presence of teleological thinking in Marxism is offered by Julian Young. In the book *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, Young gives an overview of the evolution of Western thought around the topic of life's meaning, particularly focusing on the so-called 'true-world philosophies' that attribute "meaning to life by representing it as a journey — a journey towards 'redemption', towards an arrival which will more than make up for the stress and discomfort of the travelling" [2014: x]. Thus, from the true-world point of view, the idea is that real life, the most meaningful part of it happens elsewhere, not in this reality. Young argues that the true-world idea first appeared in Plato's dialogues and reached its heyday in medieval Christianity. In the *Republic*, Plato outlined his metaphysics according to which the reality is divided into two worlds — the world of becoming, i.e., the world that we see, and the world of unchanging being, the true world, which, however, we cannot see. In the world of being, things are truly the things they are, whereas in the world of becoming things are only approximately the things we believe them to be [Plato, 2000]. According to Plato, the immortal soul of the human originally belonged in the heaven, however, because of its failure to control its desires it has fallen to Earth and entered a human body. The soul, Plato suggested, cannot return

to the heaven for 10,000 years, unless it redeems itself through living the best life, which he understood as the philosophical life, three times. This idea that Plato expressed about the three stages the immortal soul goes through — sin, fall and redemption, — as Young argues [2014], has dominated Western thought, for more than two millennia. Christianity adopted and adapted Plato's metaphysics, and with it his way of attributing meaning to life.

Young points out the outstanding adaptability of the true-world narrative, as it has also managed to survive after the death of the Christian God. Thus, the promise of a true world continues into the works of Hegel with his idea of development, and eventually Marx. As opposed to Platonism and Christianity, however, both Hegel and Marx relocate the promised better world from the other world, into the future of this world [Young, 2014]. In this sense, according to Young, Marx's communist utopia has the same ontological standing as the Platonic or Christian heaven and is based on the same meaning-giving narrative, i.e., that the good life is to be achieved in another dimension (not here and now) and via redemption, which in this case comes in the form of revolution. As Young points out, some twentieth-century thinkers (for example, Albert Camus) critiqued Marxism for restoring the religious belief in the supernatural, while to many after the Second World War, construction of the communist utopia appeared incredibly appealing as nearly the only good cause that was left and could give meaning to life [ibid.].

Interestingly, over time, Marx moved away from the normative developmentalism that his thinking is typically associated with, as can be seen in his later writings, particularly, the *Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* [Rowe, 2024]. In the *Ethnological Notebooks*, inspired by examples of societies that lived in what Engels called 'primitive communism', particularly the Haudenosaunee Nation, Marx offers a less rigid and less linear vision of societal development [Gailey, 2006], thus, moving away from the rigidity of the true-world narrative.³ However, since the *Notebooks* were only published in 1972, the key historical figures that promoted the communist utopia had not been able to read the manuscript. As a result, Marxism, and politico-economic projects such as the USSR, were greatly informed by Marx's original theory rooted in Hegel's theory of development and the Judeo-Christian and Platonic idea of redemption and the true world.

³ Glen Coulthard [2014] writes in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*: "...in the last decade of his life, Marx no longer condemns non-Western and noncapitalist social formations to necessarily pass through the destructive phase of capitalist development as the condition of possibility for human freedom and flourishing".

Thus, as Young shows [2014], having survived for millennia, the true-world narratives are incredibly persistent in Western thought. Most Western thinkers today, would argue that such grand narratives about the meaning and purpose of human life, including in the form of the Marxist theory of development, have lost their narrative power [Goldman, 2019]. However, although typically dismissed by many authors today as outdated, the presence of the true-world narrative can still be traced in economic thought and practice today, namely, in the form of the concepts of economic development and growth [Castoriadis, 1985; Latouche, 2004]. What are the ideas of economic growth, progress and development that are so central to modern capitalism if not the continuation of the true-world narrative, the same as in Plato or Christianity or Hegelism, promising a better life elsewhere (in the future) and redemption through labour [Young, 2014]?

What are the key features of the true-world framings of meaningfulness? Seen as a journey, true-world accounts of human life (from Plato, to Christianity, to Hegelism and Marxism) imply a linear progression and orientation on a certain goal. Thus, they suggest a teleology, purposefulness of human life. Consequently, the true-world narrative also implies and relies on a linear perception of time. This idea of a teleology, a unilinear journey towards the 'true world' is so deeply ingrained in the Western worldview that it manifests even in the individualised narratives of meaning, i.e., the meaning-in-life narratives, although it can be framed in different terms. For example, Nietzsche talks about seeing one's life as a novel, and Foucault talks about constructing one's life as an artwork [Young, 2014].

Overall, in common parlance the question 'what is the meaning of life?' more often than not means 'what is the purpose of my or human existence?'. In many Western conceptualisations of meaningfulness, progression towards a goal becomes imperative of the good life, and it is this progression that grants meaning to human life. Thus, this purposefulness also implies conditionality. In the Western philosophical tradition, meaningfulness of one's life is commonly understood as conditional and dependent on the achievement of a certain goal. And eventually the worthiness of one's life is judged based on the extent to which the person, or humanity in general, has progressed towards the defined goal. This drive for purposeful existence is part of the Western worldview and also makes part of the ontological foundations of capitalism, contributing to the capitalist idea of a good life as something that is placed in the future and needs to be earned and

worked for. Similar to other true-world theories, the capitalist idea of economic growth and development, promises happiness, an end to human suffering through an ever-increasing standard of living [Wendling, 2018]. The capitalist 'redemption', the same as in the case of Marxism, is placed in the future, the progression towards which should take place linearly, following the ever-increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and work.

Thus, modern capitalism with its growth orientation is ontologically rooted in the ancient teleological (true-world) narratives that are closely related to the question of life's meaning and that represent an important part of the Western culture. These narratives contribute to the conceptual power of capitalism and also become tools of control in the sense of shaping the narratives about individual and collective life. However, their power cannot be limited to the narrative aspect alone. Using Cornelius Castoriadis' term [2005], the idea of teleological meaningfulness makes part of the capitalist imaginary, i.e., a collection of shared beliefs and representations that underpin capitalism. These beliefs and representations, acting as an invisible force, shape human behaviour and institutions under capitalism, hence, they have practical implications. They also are woven into the broader system of meaning-creation that underlies capitalism and shape meanings in a broad sense, not only in relation to the topic of life's meaning.

As was discussed above, historically, in Western thought, the question of the meaning of human life was at different times the domain of philosophy and religion. However, while both have failed to provide sustained framings of meaning, in the sense that the grand narratives about human life offered by both Christianity and philosophy to a great extent lost their conceptual power, the economic domain, and specifically capitalism, seems to have continued the tradition of teleological, true-world narratives. Capitalism frames these narratives in more secular and rationalised terms, in the form of the ideas of economic growth and progress [Castoriadis, 1985; Young, 2014]. The ideas of purposefulness and teleology are so deeply ingrained in the Western worldview that more often than not they remain unnoticed, and, consequently, unquestioned. However, it could be further argued that it is also due to this secularisation and rationalisation that the true-world narrative in its capitalist framing is questioned less than its religious or philosophical counterparts. Nonetheless, the teleological narrative holds its place within economic thinking, eventually translating into economic practices, and, under capitalism, contributing to and justifying ever greater economic expansion with the ecological and social damage associated with it. As will be discussed in the next chapters, this is, however, only one of

the possible ways of thinking about the purpose and meaning of/in human life, and other framings can be found to underpin more sustainable and more equitable socioeconomic systems.

1.4 Economics of meaning

The question of the meaning of life (at least in the Western tradition), as Young puts it [2014], is characterised by a certain ‘imperialism’ in the sense that one’s recognising something as the meaning of their life suggests acknowledging that value as the highest one that stands above all other values. This idea applies also when talking about the question of meaningfulness on a smaller scale, i.e., in terms of the meaning *in* life, which, as has been discussed above, is a more common framing in Western literature nowadays. If something is identified as a source of meaning in one’s life, whether it is work, family, experience, wealth or something else, it is attributed particular importance and attention above everything else that is not identified as a source of meaning. Thus, as Nader El-Bizri [in Leach and Tartaglia (eds.), 2018: 96] argues, “[t]he question of the meaning of life is closely related to the question of what it is ‘to be’ rather than ‘not to be’.”

An economy, in its turn, is what allows meeting society’s needs [Raworth, 2017]. A specific form of economic organisation (for example, capitalism) is the way society arranges its interaction with the world around it and within itself in the pursuit of meeting those needs. As such, economic organisation, among other things, reflects the way we see ourselves, our place in this world and the world itself. Thus, the way an economic system is organised, with the concrete relations, institutions, laws and other elements that constitute it, has roots in belief systems and is based on concrete choices on how to meet society’s needs. In line, with El-Bizri’s quote above, economic systems are also related to the question of what it is ‘to be’ rather than ‘not to be’. Thus, economic activity is one of the planes through which humans manifest themselves and their values and meanings into this world. However, under capitalism, the economic domain has been claiming a greater role in human life in general. Serge Latouche [2019] calls this the ‘economic totalitarianism’. In a similar vein, Kate Soper [2023: 1] talks about the authoritarian force of the market that makes people “sacrifice or marginalise everything that is not commercially viable.” Another term used to refer to this ever-greater penetration of the economic logic and practice into people’s lives is ‘economism’. It was first used at the

end of the 19th century by Lenin to critique the separation of political and economic struggles among some groups of Russian social democrats [Bottomore, 1991], whereas today it is used to critique the dominance of the economic logic in modern capitalism. Economism has been referred to as the dominant ordering principle [Noorgard et al., 2016] in capitalist societies and compared to a religion “that frames each person’s very existence” [Noorgard, 2010: 128].

The dominance of the economic logic also spreads into the domain of life’s meaning. On the one hand, it feeds into the idea that “the unlimited growth of production and of the productive forces is [...] the central objective of human existence” [Castoriadis, 1985: 24], thus, reducing the understanding of human life to the economic function, i.e., to the *homo economicus* [ibid.]. On the other hand, it also leads to what could be called the economisation of the search for meaning. Karl Polanyi [1957] called the capitalist economy disembedded due to the growing disconnection of economic activities from other social relationships, such as redistribution and reciprocity. As opposed to the embedded non-capitalist, pre-industrial economies, in capitalism few economic activities take place outside of the market economy. This way, the economy becomes disembedded from society. Although this disembeddedness is not absolute [Granovetter, 1985], as a result of the expansion of the market and commodification [Polanyi, 1957], the economy becomes an ever more important domain for human interactions and self-identification [Bauman, 2000]. Inevitably, it also becomes a major, if not the primary, carrier, source and plane for creating and experiencing meaningfulness in one’s life. The capitalist economic system offers each ever more opportunities for generating their personal meanings through consumerism and prosumerism, while simultaneously closing up spaces where meaning was generated before, such as community relations [Polanyi, 1957] and spirituality. In that, capitalism relies on the presently dominant Western framing of the question of meaningfulness that suggests individualised creation of meanings. While, traditionally, the pursuit of meaning was seen as connecting with something bigger than oneself, today the focus has shifted to individuation. Zygmunt Bauman [2000] argues that, under modernity, the continuous process of creating oneself and one’s meanings is compulsive and obligatory (leading to unmitigated uncertainty and perpetual anxiety). With the individual having become the primary source of meaning-creation, capitalism gains extraordinary power by creating dependence on its products as a solution to the quest for meaning. Thus, the idea and need for an individual search for meaning that has been described in philosophy (and first conceptualised by the Romantics) and is now

being further elaborated in psychology is being satisfied by the market, making the economic domain one of the key planes of the search for and creation of meaning in one's life.

Many critics of capitalism have pointed out the importance of the capitalist vision of a good life to the sustaining, functioning and expansion of the capitalist system [Muraca, 2013; Moore, 2015; Soper, 2023]. Laurent Berlant [2011] talks about the 'cruel optimism' of capitalism that derives from the capitalist promise of a good life for everyone (hence, the optimism), which, however, can never be achieved (hence, cruel) due to the system's reliance on exploitation [Marx, 2018]. Similar to the narratives of a 'good life' that it seeks to monopolise [Soper, 2023], capitalism also monopolises the idea of a meaningful life, turning hope for a better, more meaningful life into a tool for keeping the capitalist machine running. This process becomes possible, among other reasons, due the desacralisation of the question of meaningfulness that took place in philosophy over the past century. In its turn, the latter can be seen as part of the broader process that has been termed 'disenchantment',⁴ i.e., "the dissolution of the 'enchanted' world, the world of spirits and meaningful causal forces", the loss of magic and of the mysterious, as defined by Charles Taylor [2007: 553]. The question of life's meaning has been to a great extent desacralised and trivialised in literature, and further banalised by the logic of capitalism, reducing the search for meaning to the plane of economic activities. However, taking inspiration from Jenkins' [2000] reflections on the whether we have ever been (fully) disenchanted, it is worth asking whether some important sources of meaning have never been lost. This topic will be addressed in the final chapters of the thesis.

Conclusion

Gaukroger [2021: 3] argues that in the philosophical context it is important "to understand what prompts particular worries to arise, what allows their translation into philosophical problems [and] what counts as their resolution." This helps understand the progress of philosophy, or the tradition of thought more broadly, and how ideas impact and shape society. In the case of the question of life's meaning in the Western tradition, related considerations have shaped not only philosophical debates but also socioeconomic

⁴ The term was first used by Friedrich Schiller and popularised by Max Weber, primarily, in the lecture *Science as a Vocation*, 1917.

practices. Therefore, understanding the roots and evolution of the debates on the topic appears extremely important for understanding the functioning of the current economic system on a deeper, ontological level. At the same time, it is also important to look at how such ideas as life's meaning and the search for meaning, which are central to Western philosophical debates, are shaped, in their turn, by the economic system as well.

As was discussed above, there are two main ways of thinking about meaningfulness in Western thought. The first one is represented by the grand narratives about the meaning of human life in general, in most cases referring to the way this meaning or purpose was intended by God or some other supranatural force. The second, more recent way of thinking about meaningfulness comes from the denial of such grand, collective narratives and is based on the idea of meaning creation on an individual basis, thus, implies meaning *in*, rather than *of*, life. Therefore, the difference between the two is in the way the source of meaning is understood, and also the scale of this meaning. In the first case, meaning is external to the human, is independent of the human and their individual desires and is only to be discovered. In the second case, meaning originates from the human themselves, i.e., its source is internal, and this meaning is to be created, rather than discovered. The difference between the two approaches is in the kind of meaning that people are looking for — whether grand, collective, or smaller and individual. The relationship in which the individual stands to meaning in both cases is also different.

In the past few decades, the meaning-in-life framings have almost fully replaced the traditional grand narratives, which today are predominantly denied by thinkers as outdated. Despite the obvious downscaling, rationalisation and desacralisation of the topic, the question of meaning continues to play a very central role in the Western perception of human life and the search for meaning continues. Moreover, narratives and beliefs related to both of these levels of meaning are present in economic thought and, consequently, also in economic practice. The question of meaning is intertwined with such ideas as what it means to live a good life and how we understand well-being, how time is perceived and what we should be dedicating our lives to, both collectively and individually. Thus, the question of meaningfulness is woven into the broader perception of human life and of our place in this world.

However, the presence of these beliefs and narratives in the economic domain more often than not remains implicit and unnoticed, and this connection between the philosophical

and economic on the plane of meaning has not been systematically analysed yet. Most literature on the topic of meaningfulness so far has not intersected other disciplines and remains confined to the domain of philosophy, and nowadays also more and more to the domain of psychology. Despite this failure to make such interdisciplinary connections, the ideas related to the question of meaningfulness are important to the Western worldview. Consequently, they manifest in the capitalist imaginary and practice and, thus, can serve as a very useful lens for understanding the worldview underlying capitalism. Similarly, they can help understand better the alternatives to the capitalist theory, such as degrowth, and look critically at the potential of such frameworks to challenge capitalism on the level of the imaginary and eventually to offer a cultural foundation for a different system. Or, maybe it would show that such projects need to make a greater effort at unthinking capitalism, which will be discussed in the coming chapters.

CHAPTER 2. Degrowth and meaningfulness

*On ne tombe pas amoureux d'un taux de croissance.*⁵

A slogan used in the revolts of May 1968 in Paris

This chapter offers an overview of degrowth as a political project and movement (section 2.1), and analyses how degrowth challenges the true-world (section 2.2) and individualised (section 2.3) narratives of meaningfulness that are engrained in the capitalist imaginary. Section 2.4 explores how the degrowth narratives of a good life challenge the capitalist imaginary, whereas section 2.5 summarises the findings of a survey carried out in the degrowth community as part of this PhD project. Section 2.6 gives an overview of the concept of *dépense* and its connections to the topic of meaningfulness. Finally, in section 2.7, I look at the importance of the feminist and decolonial approaches to degrowth in general and to the degrowth project of unthinking capitalism, specifically.

2.1 Degrowth: a political project and a movement

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measures economic activity of a country in monetary terms. The United Nations' *System of National Accounts*, which sets an international standard of national accounting, defines GDP as “an aggregate measure of production [...] equal to the sum of the gross value added of all resident institutional units engaged in production (plus any taxes, and minus any subsidies, on products not included in the value of their outputs)” [SNA, 2009: 8].

The GDP measure was developed in 1934 by Simon Kuznets, an economist at the time working at the US National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER).⁶ The development of the index was commissioned by the US Government, which, following the Great Depression, needed a tool that could provide a comprehensive overview of the state of

⁵ One does not fall in love with a growth rate.

⁶ The measure that was developed by Kuznets was actually the Gross National Product (GNP), which accounts for all the goods and services produced by the citizens of a country regardless of the geographical location. Conversely, GDP takes account of all the production on the territory of one country regardless of its ownership. The shift from GNP to GDP took place in the 1990s when the US government sought to account for the economic activities of the foreign companies based on the territory of the US.

the economy and inform economic policies [Philipsen, 2015]. Kuznets proposed a 'thermometer of success' [Fioramonti, 2017: 48], a measure aggregating economic production into one single number that would change based on the state of the economy. Although attempts at measuring national income had already been made previously, GDP was the first one to offer such a high level of detail. The report prepared by Kuznets and colleagues, *National Income, 1929–1932*, seized the attention of the US public, and the New York Times described the report as “the most complete and detailed ever compiled” [Philipsen, 2015]. However, as Fioramonti [2013] argues, the turning point in the legitimisation of GDP and its introduction into political decision-making as a metric was the Second World War, which dictated the need for a top-down command over the economic activities. In 1953, the United Nations published the first Standards of National Accounting (SNA), which heavily relied on Kuznets' methodology [Fioramonti, 2013], thus, legitimising GDP on the international scale.

The first attempts to develop a national accounting system similar to today's GDP were made significantly earlier. For example, Fioramonti [2013] identified the precursors of GDP back in the seventeenth-century Britain and France. However, it was GDP that managed to create a shift in national economic statistics, with which also came a shift in economic thinking. At the same time, the metric itself also emerged out of a certain politico-economic context. Thus, Hirschman [2016] argues that GDP was made possible only in the 20th century due to the accessibility of economic data, which in its turn was possible due to such key developments at the time as the rise of big corporations, the spread of wage labour and increasing administrative capacity. In its turn, the statistical accounting behind GDP — coupled with the spread of Keynesianism — made national economies manageable for the state [Fioramonti, 2017]. And it was also GDP that helped turn economic growth into a policy objective as opposed to being seen only as a means to an end [Parrique, 2019].

Today, GDP has evolved to the level of an international standard measure of economic progress, and has occupied a central place in the modern understanding and functioning of national economies [Hirschman, 2016]. However, nowadays GDP serves not only as a measure of economic functioning and an objective for economic planning, but also as a benchmark for evaluating the progress of entire societies. At the same time, the idea of progress that it both evaluates and depicts is very particular. Like any other indicator, GDP is not value-neutral [Schmelzer, 2016]. As Parrique [2019] puts it, decisions about

what is included in GDP, i.e., the so-called ‘production boundary’, are deeply political. Similarly, the choice to use GDP as the primary statistic of national development is deeply political; so is the decision to measure progress at all and the belief that there is (and should be) such a thing as ‘progress’ [Castoriadis, 1985]. GDP, thus, reflects the worldviews and political structures that it originates from and, at the same time, being the preferred indicator of collective progress and well-being, further reproduces them into society. While representing certain values, GDP and its popularisation paved the way for deep cultural transformations, including the commodification and economisation of social life. As Parrique [2019] points out, GDP was not the only factor at the root of economisation, however, it played an important role in defining and underpinning it.

In the economised worldview, being — both human and non-human — is reduced to the economic function [Castoriadis, 1985; Latouche, 2005]. With the social sphere having been equated with, or even overridden by the economic domain, GDP became the measure of society’s well-being. Kuznets himself warned against inferring well-being from the national income. Thus, Kuznets wondered: “If the GDP is up, why is America down?” [quoted in Parrique, 2019]. Similarly, as research shows, the relationship between economic growth, on the one hand, and such factors of social well-being as education, health, employment, etc., on the other, is not necessarily linear [e.g., Borowy & Aillon, 2017; Koch et al., 2017; Haider et al., 2023]. It would be a major oversimplification to say that economic development has not contributed to the improvement of the living conditions at all. However, similarly, it would be a major oversimplification to say that more economic growth always means more well-being. Nonetheless, across the world, GDP has become the primary indicator used to judge a nation’s well-being, with GDP growth, in the common perception, being associated with positive outcomes for society. Today, despite the existence of a number of alternative, more holistic measures of well-being (e.g., Human Development Index, Better Life Index, Genuine Progress Indicator, etc.), GDP is still prioritised and keeps informing decision-making across the globe.

In addition to the fact that it rendered economic growth socially desirable, another outcome of GDP invention, as Parrique [2019] suggests, is the birth of the idea that economic growth can be limitless. As Parrique [ibid., 59] puts it, “[i]t is only because [GDP] was invented that we can today speak of economic *growth*”. Moreover, followed by the development of the macroeconomic theory that sees the monetary economy as detached from the environment, GDP legitimised the idea of economic growth decoupled from the

biophysical impact [Mitchel, 2011]. Eventually, due to GDP, among other factors, the obsession with economic growth, or growthism, has become “one of the most hegemonic ideologies in modern history”, as Jason Hickel [2020: 18] puts it.

However, despite the tremendous impact GDP — ‘one of the great inventions of the 20th century’, according to Landefield [2000] — has had on shaping the systems of economism and growthism, it is important to emphasise that today’s economic, political and social focus on growth cannot be reduced to the cultural aspect alone. Without the technological and institutional changes that were taking place at the same time, today’s ideology of economic growth would not exist either. Throughout the greatest part of human history, annual economic growth rate in the range of 2–3%, which was a general expectation for developed countries until recently [O’Neill, 2012], was not common at all. The economic expansion demonstrated by and expected of countries after the Second World War is, thus, a relatively new phenomenon [Maddison, 2001]. Furthermore, recently, following the Great Recession of 2008, many developed countries have been again experiencing significantly lower GDP growth rates, which has been referred to as ‘secular stagnation’ [Summers, 2016]. Importantly, those high growth rates observed in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century would not be possible without technological progress, the Industrial Revolution and the accessibility of cheap fuel [Malm, 2016].

In addition to all the factors that have led to the emergence of the ideology of growth and its integration into the social imaginary [Castoriadis, 1987], it is also critical to recognise the factors that create institutional and societal dependency on continuous economic growth. Most economies in the modern world are systemically dependent on what the growing GDP value represents, i.e., the expansion of economic activities, ever-increasing economic output and consumption. For example, the pension and the monetary systems are designed based on the idea of an expanding economy. Therefore, today, capitalist economies need people to produce and spend more in order to keep running and avoid a recession that would have devastating effects on society [Schmelzer et al., 2022]. The modern economies, in this sense, are not designed for stagnation or shrinking. Thus, as Schmelzer et al. [2022] suggest, growth is a structural imperative.

The capitalist economic system with its growth orientation and growth dependence has been critiqued by many thinkers as unsustainable, unfeasible and/or undesirable. One of

such responses to the failures of the capitalist system has been degrowth. Today, three facets of degrowth can be identified: 1) degrowth as a utopian political project, 2) degrowth as a movement, and 3) degrowth as a research framework [Asara, 2022]. For the purposes of the current text, the first two facets of degrowth are particularly relevant.

Although many key ideas and values that degrowth stands for can be traced in many cultures and traditions [Muradian, 2019; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019], the roots of degrowth as we know it today can be traced back to the European context in the 1960s. Thus, Latouche [2016] talks about the precursors of degrowth, whereas Parrique [2019] refers to the 1968–2002 period as the prehistory of degrowth. A critical point in the development of anti-growth critique, primarily, in Europe, was the publication of *The Limits to Growth* report in 1972 [Meadows et al., 1972]. The term ‘degrowth’ was first used in French by the French thinker André Gorz in 1972 when discussing that report: “Is the earth’s balance, for which no-growth [*non-croissance*] – or even degrowth [*décroissance*] – of material production is a necessary condition, compatible with the survival of the capitalist system?” [Gorz, 1973]. It has been pointed out that Gorz used the term *décroissance* in a sense different from its current use — in the sense of shrinking [Latouche, 2019]. Later, it was used by a few other French authors, broadly in a similar sense to the meaning invested in it by Gorz [Parrique, 2019].

As Parrique [2019] asserts, these appearances of the term in literature and debates were representative of the intellectual and cultural atmosphere that had developed around the end of the era of fast economic growth that had been enjoyed by Western countries during the post-war period, the so-called Glorious Thirty. Thus, the emergence of the French term *décroissance* coincided with the emergence of a line of environmental and critical politico-economic thought (including such names as Georgescu-Roegen, Carson, Marcuse, Castoriadis, Boulding, Schumacher, Easterlin, Hirsch, Daly, etc.) and activism in the 1960–70s, when societies started to question the possibility and desirability of economic growth as the core idea of economic and social organization.

In 2001–2002, after a couple of decades of ‘hibernation’ [Parrique, 2019], *décroissance* reappeared in a few texts, receiving ever new dimensions of meaning. For example, Serge Latouche [2015] played a critical role in shaping degrowth by adding to it the idea of the ‘decolonisation of the imaginary’ and making an important connection with the post-development critique. Both ideas remain integral parts of the degrowth vision today. From

France, following publications, conferences and political events, the idea of *décroissance* started spreading and in the early 2000s was picked up by activists in other places in Europe and the Americas (Italy, Catalonia, Spain, Germany, Quebec, Mexico, etc.) [Parrique, 2019]. In 2008, the first International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity was held in Paris, where the English term ‘degrowth’ was used for the first time. Also there, the first attempt was made at defining it. In the Paris Declaration, degrowth was defined as “a voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society” [Research & Degrowth, 2010].

However, today it is difficult to find an exhaustive definition for degrowth [Parrique, 2019]. Having emerged in France, the notion of degrowth spread to other places, acquiring particular shades of meaning in every context and with every turn of its international path. Moreover, degrowth has strong activist, practical and academic dimensions, which all simultaneously shape what the term stands for. Today, it keeps developing in local contexts around local activist and research groups, and at the same time also on the international scale, particularly around the international degrowth conferences⁷ and such initiatives as the International Degrowth Network (IDN)⁸. Since its first use, even in English, the popularity of the term ‘degrowth’ has grown tremendously, and the number of publications looking at degrowth from various disciplinary and thematic perspectives as well as the number of events dedicated to degrowth have been on the rise, too. Thus, today, degrowth is very diverse and gathers around itself a variety of people and opinions, sometimes also leading to disagreements and opposing stances on such topics as the role of state [Cosme et al., 2017], freedom [Windegger & Spash, 2022] and degrowth strategies [Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2018].

Despite the diversity intrinsic to degrowth, what unites people under its banner is the shared understanding that the current socioeconomic system with its growth dependence is neither sustainable, nor desirable, and that a better system should and can be created. Schmelzer et al. [2022] suggest that the following seven lines of critique of growth are central to degrowth: ecological critique, socioeconomic critique, cultural critique, critique of capitalism, feminist critique, critique of industrialism, and South-North critique. It is commonly suggested that the central idea of degrowth is reduction of resource and

⁷ A list of and further details on the past international degrowth conferences can be found at <https://degrowth.info/en/conferences>.

⁸ The International Degrowth Network (IDN) is an open, self-organised network of individuals and organisations interested in supporting degrowth. Further details can be found at <https://degrowth.net/>.

energy throughput of economies [Engler et al., 2024]. Indeed, one of the disciplinary roots of degrowth comes from ecological economics, from which degrowth inherited a focus on the material dimension of economic activities, including the material and energy flows, and the ecological implications thereof. Therefore, the idea of ecological limits is key to degrowth critique [Kallis, 2019]. However, as Schmelzer et al. [2022] insist, one distinctive feature of degrowth is its holistic approach informed by all of the above lines of critique, which is ultimately helps “safeguard degrowth against right-wing appropriation”. While by far not every text on degrowth manages to incorporate all these dimensions of growth critique [Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Engler et al., 2024], among degrowth thinkers there is a general recognition of degrowth as framed around the pursuit of justice [D’Alisa et al., 2014; Schmelzer et al., 2022]. Thus, in its critique of growthism, degrowth points not only at the ecological implications of economic growth, but also at the fact that GDP growth does not necessarily contribute to improved social well-being, (e.g., poverty reduction, improved employment, improved health, higher subjective well-being) [Sekulova, 2014], as well as the fact that the growth-oriented capitalist system is entangled with the patriarchal [Hanaček et al., 2020] and colonial systems [Hickel, 2020]. Therefore, from the degrowth perspective, the ecological crisis, social and global inequality are seen as closely intertwined, thus, degrowth politicises these issues [Schmelzer et al., 2022]. This political facet of degrowth critique calls for challenging the power structures that capitalist growth relies on [D’Alisa et al., 2014], and degrowth is commonly framed around the concept of autonomy, which can be understood as ongoing self-determination and self-institution, i.e., “the highest freedom and justice possible” [Asara et al., 2013].

Therefore, the objective of degrowth, as it is understood by most degrowth thinkers today, is not merely to shrink or slow down the existing system, but to change the entire principle of its functioning. Illustrating this point, Kallis et al. [in D’Alisa et al., 2014] write: “Degrowth does not call for doing less of the same. The objective is not to make an elephant leaner, but to turn an elephant into a snail”. Importantly, degrowth literature insists that achieving the utopian degrowth vision of a more sustainable and just socioeconomic system is not only a matter of technological and institutional considerations, but also of a deep cultural shift, what Latouche called the ‘decolonisation of the imaginary’, as will be discussed below. As a result, degrowth analysis of capitalism and economic growth also incorporates ontological critique [D’Alisa et al., 2014; Romano, 2019].

One remark that is important to make here is the issue of defining the system that needs to be changed. Within degrowth literature it is common to identify the growth imperative as one of the intrinsic features of capitalism [Brand et al., 2021]. For comparison, post-growth literature, tends to be less critical of capitalism compared to degrowth, calling for a system that is socially and ecologically sustainable, regardless of whether it is capitalism or not. However, while degrowth tends to focus specifically on the critique of capitalism, degrowth literature also recognises that growth orientation has been characteristic not only of capitalism. The same growth orientation also existed in the planned economy of the Soviet Union [Ofer, 1988; Bataille, 1988]. Thus, the systemic critique that degrowth offers is targeted against both growthism and capitalism.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that degrowth as a line of thought and a movement emerged in Europe, specifically, in Western Europe. Still today, it remains predominantly European. For example, a systematic mapping of policy proposals in degrowth literature carried out by Fitzpatrick et al. [2022] showed that out of the 446 studied texts 77% originated from Europe, with the top three countries being Spain, United Kingdom and Germany, i.e., Western-European countries. Critical theoretical frameworks and practices that overlap with the objectives and values of degrowth— for example, autonomy, post-development, economic democratisation, solidarity, justice, etc. — have also existed or emerged in other contexts, e.g., food sovereignty movements, *buen vivir* and ecovillages [Kothari et al., 2019]. However, it is important to emphasise and be aware of this European origin of what is currently called degrowth, which together with its evolution, continues to shape the movement's theoretical and practical focus. How this European focus shapes the framing of the topic of the meaning of life from the degrowth perspective will be discussed in the coming sections.

2.2 Post-development and anti-growthism

The degrowth critique of capitalism and of its growth orientation calls for challenging and questioning the Western culture itself, including how we think about the economy, society, nature and the place of the human in this world. A foundation for degrowth thought to take on this lens of cultural and ontological critique was laid by Serge Latouche [2015] and the idea of the 'decolonisation of the imaginary', which, in its turn, relies on the work of

Cornelius Castoriadis [1987] on the social imaginary and the 'imaginary' dimension of capitalism.

Despite the importance of the ontological facet in degrowth critique, so far, it has not been one of the primary studied topics in degrowth literature. For example, the idea of the decolonisation of the imaginary has not been substantially theorised by many other degrowth scholars since Latouche [Feola, 2019]. As a result, while it remains central to degrowth debates, the use of the term is often rather vague, and, furthermore, the predominantly economic focus of the meanings invested in it is typically not questioned. Overall, today, degrowth literature has a major focus on the practical dimensions of the socioecological transformation, i.e., defining the problem (what is wrong with the current system?) and possible solutions (how things can be improved?) [Barlow et al., 2022]. Of course, elaboration of strategies for degrowth implementation, including developing policy and sector-specific proposals, is key to turning the degrowth utopia into reality. At the same time, given this focus, the philosophical aspects of the systemic critique often remain on the fringe of degrowth thought. Therefore, it is no surprise that the topic of the meaning of life has not been particularly studied in degrowth literature. One rare exception that directly addresses the topic of meaningfulness in the degrowth context is the concept of *dépense*, which is discussed in section 2.6 below. Besides this conceptual connection, the question of meaningfulness is usually not addressed in degrowth literature directly and, thus, can be said to lie outside of the primary scope of degrowth thought today. On the other hand, even though this is typically not made explicit in literature, degrowth nonetheless challenges the capitalist narratives related to the topic of meaningfulness [Spash, 2024]. One of the ways in which degrowth does this is through the critique of the idea of development.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the capitalist idea of economic growth and development is reinforced by the Judeo-Christian teleological narrative, according to which human life is oriented towards a better world, or the 'true world', using Julian Young's terminology [2014]. Human life in this picture of the world is purposeful as it aspires towards this better world — whether in another realm or in the future of the present world. Hegel put this narrative in the terms of development and civilisational progress [ibid.], and his follower Karl Marx put it in economic terms, as a politico-economic progression towards communism. This teleology of development places social life on a

linear — and even more than that, unilinear — time line, along which societies are expected to progress [Castoriadis, 1985; Wesson, 1999]; Young, 2014].

The modern capitalist narratives of economic growth and development are a continuation of the same world perception where human existence is assigned a purpose, but in this case through economic expansion and the (promised) improvement in the quality of life [Castoriadis, 1985; Berlant, 2011]. As was discussed earlier, this teleological narrative, and, hence, the idea of purposeful being, is very much engrained in the Western ontology — at least since Plato — and the dominant Western perceptions of both individual and collective life [Young, 2014]. On the other hand, one of the key tenets of degrowth thought is the denial of the narratives of development and economic growth. So, in this sense, degrowth in its critique of capitalism has been targeting the teleological narrative lying at the root of capitalism and the dominant Western culture in general.

The critique of development in degrowth literature has its roots in post-development theory, which became prominent in the 1980–90s as an attack on the Western idea of development that had been imposed onto the countries in the Global South for decades [Matthews, 2018]. As Jason Hickel [2017] describes in *The Divide*, the notion of development gained a place on the international agenda thanks to nearly an accident, when it was added to President Truman's 1949 speech by his advisors. Following the speech, the notion gained international traction (also based on very eager support within the country), dividing the countries into developed and underdeveloped, with the former 'generously' extending a helping hand to lead the latter out of poverty and hunger. In Truman's words: "We must embark on a bold new programme for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas" [1949]. The idea of development evolved further through the work of national development agencies and international NGOs, as well as through theoretical elaborations. Thus, in 1960 Rostow further developed the idea in the book *The stages of economic growth*, which became central to international economic development thought. The book defined the issue of development in technical terms, suggesting that poorer nations simply need to follow the Western path of modernisation, including implementing free market policies, in order to achieve the Western level of development, which is to be seen as the benchmark for all other countries.

However, as critics of the idea of development have pointed out, the project of development has not been universally beneficial, especially, for developing countries. Thus, development has been critiqued as a model that is entangled in the capitalist system and, as such, relies on and reproduces inequality, further perpetuating cultural and economic domination of developed countries over the developing ones [Fanon, 1961; Frank, 1966; Amin, 1990]. In the process, the project of development also marginalises local knowledge systems and practices, undermines local economies and causes ecological damage [Escobar, 2008]. Jeffrey Sachs [1992, 1] summarised the outcomes of the project of international development as follows: “The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work”. The critique of the idea of development has been also linked to the critique of modernity. Although post-development literature cannot be reduced to a single, uniform position in relation to the ideas of modernity and progress, the Eurocentric discourse on modernity and progress has been critiqued as one of the tools that helps sustain the political, economic and cultural hegemony of Western countries [Escobar, 1992; Quijano, 2000] and that is rooted in violence and racism [Mbembe & Dubois, 2017; Mignolo, 2011]. Thus, Walter Mignolo [2011: 155] insists that “‘modernity’ is a European narrative that hides its darker side, ‘coloniality’”.

Thus, many post-development thinkers critique not only the reality of the implementation of the idea of development (i.e., policies and institutions and their failures), but also the idea of development itself, i.e., the idea of the possibility and desirability of infinite progress, identifying it as intrinsically Western [Rist, 1997]. Since the problem lies not only with its implementation, but with the idea as such, many post-development authors reject the possibility of improving the development practice, for example, in the form of sustainable development.

Through the works of such key post-development thinkers as Ivan Illich, Arturo Escobar and Serge Latouche the critique of development claimed a central place in degrowth thought. Along with a socio-metabolic and thermodynamic analysis of capitalist growth, post-development critique represents one of the two intellectual strands that shaped degrowth in its initial phases [Latouche, 2014; Schmelzer et al., 2022]. Thus, in degrowth, the critique of development goes hand-in-hand with the critique of economic growth. However, according to some authors, the problematisation of economic growth is more

relevant in the Global North context, whereas the issue of development is more relevant to the Global South context [Parrique, 2019; Schmelzer et al., 2022].

On the ontological level, however, the ideas of development and economic growth as critiqued by post-development theory and degrowth are similar in the sense that both are established upon an underlying belief in infinite, universal and unilinear progress. At the root of both lies the mentioned Judeo-Christian teleological narrative that promises a better life elsewhere. In this sense, both economic growth and development — in the way that they are currently conceptualised in line with the dominant Western worldview — suggest and call for an orientation of collective and individual life towards a goal, a better future. This goal and this future are now defined in economic terms, as opposed to, for example, the Christian vision, which put it in terms of religious belief. Achieving this goal, in its turn, requires continuous transcendence, overcoming of limits (whether ecological, individual or other) that prevent societies from living the promised better life [Kallis, 2019]. Thus, both economic development and economic growth are also linked to the idea of realisation of human potential against external limits, with this potential being understood primarily in economic, productive and technological terms. Finally, both rely on a perception of time and history as linear, which is also central to the Western worldview [Han, 2017; Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022].

Thus, while the idea of development as we currently know it might have obtained traction less than 100 years ago, its roots extend far beyond Truman's 1949 speech and even Hegel's work. As was discussed in Chapter 1, both the idea of economic growth and development rely on narratives that date back centuries and even millennia. These narratives closely relate to the dominant Western perceptions of human existence and the purpose thereof (i.e., the meaning-of-life narratives discussed in the previous chapter), and are deeply ingrained in the Western worldview.

When degrowth challenges the growth narrative and calls for unthinking it, it does so, first of all, on the economic, social and ecological, rather than philosophical grounds. However, by challenging the belief in the idea of economic growth and progress, degrowth also challenges the dominant and ancient beliefs about human life and life in general, namely the teleological, true-world narratives. This prompts a number of questions. Does challenging the idea of economic growth also require challenging those ancient beliefs? For example, does degrowth need to search for a new conceptualisation of time? Does

degrowth have the capacity to offer such a deep cultural critique? And if degrowth manages to shake those ancient beliefs related to human existence and meaningfulness that are rooted in the teleology of the true-world narratives [Young, 2014], what could be the potential consequences of challenging such foundational narratives? Could they re-emerge in a new, post-growth form? And what can degrowth offer in their place?

It can be said that degrowth does not need to offer all these solutions. However, as a theoretical framework and a utopian project that is attempting to challenge such concepts as economic growth and development, it appears important for degrowth to be aware of the scale and roots of the conceptual constructs that it is dealing with. On the other hand, it could also be assumed the critique that degrowth offers is symptomatic of the ongoing cultural changes, i.e., the questioning of the dominant worldview that are already taking place in society. In this sense, degrowth could be seen as one of the attempts of the Global North to decolonise its imaginary, including the dominant beliefs about human life and its meaning.

Another dimension of the meaning-creation framework that capitalism relies on and that degrowth challenges is consumerism.

2.3 Anti-consumerism

In its analysis of the ecological and climate crises, degrowth seeks to repoliticise the issue of ecological responsibility. In particular, many degrowth authors would reject the term 'Anthropocene' due to its homogenising premise — the idea that it is the entirety of humanity that is responsible for the ecological damage caused by economic activities, i.e., that everyone is equally responsible. On the contrary, drawing on the politico-ecological perspective [Gorz, 1980], degrowth makes a point to differentiate actors within society based on the corresponding impact that they have on the environment [Parrique, 2019]. At the same time, in response to the depoliticised narratives of ecological responsibility that place all of it onto the consumers and their individual choices, degrowth tends instead to shift the focus towards the power structures of capitalism and the responsibility of the production side. This way degrowth aims to challenge the idea of privatised responsibility for ecological destruction and the diversion of public attention away from the industries that are profiting from ecological destruction towards individuals,

who, in their turn, have a much more limited capacity to influence the system [Schmelzer et al., 2022]. At the same time, degrowth does not deny the personal responsibility of consumers either. Thus, in its critique, degrowth calls for reconsidering both the production and consumption sides of the economic equation [Parrique, 2019]. Such concepts as frugality, simple living and voluntary simplicity that call for a simpler lifestyle independent of consumption of things are intrinsic elements of the degrowth vision [D'Alisa et al., 2014].

The critique of consumerism in degrowth is two-pronged. On the one hand, consumerism is recognised as one of the drivers of economic growth, in the sense that the growth-based capitalist economic system — with the ecological damage that it results in — depends on the continuous consumption of goods and services. On the other hand, degrowth critique problematises the dependence of human well-being and the task of meeting needs under capitalism on consumption [Parrique, 2019]. The focus on this well-being–consumption link is particularly prominent in degrowth critique, and has been described as the consumerist trap of the fact that under capitalism one can become happier only through buying more things [Latouche, 2011]. Thus, degrowth calls for decoupling human well-being from consumption and for focusing instead on activities that contribute to well-being directly [Parrique, 2019; Schmelzer et al., 2022]. Similarly, Kate Soper [2023: 59], calling for post-growth ‘alternative hedonism’, makes a point, which is relatable from the degrowth perspective as well, that “even if the consumerist lifestyle were indefinitely sustainable it would not enhance human happiness and well-being beyond a certain point already reached by many”.

In this sense, degrowth follows the well-being-focused line of critique of capitalism that, as John O'Neill [2008] points out, is common for Western environmental movements, which call for finding satisfaction, contentment and well-being outside of consumption. O'Neill [ibid.] calls this argument a hedonist rhetoric, due to its focus on the well-being and affective element. Interestingly, despite this hedonist rhetoric, when talking about well-being, degrowth authors tend to highlight eudaimonic values rather than hedonism, contrasting the degrowth vision of well-being with the hedonist pleasures that capitalism relies on [D'Alisa et al., 2014]. This, in its turn, could probably be explained by the limitarian philosophy of degrowth based on the ideas of moderation and prudence [Kallis, 2019].

Thus, from the degrowth perspective, both the quantity and the quality of consumption should change [Parrique, 2019]. Furthermore, the decoupling of well-being from consumption should take place both on the practical level and on the cultural level, i.e., both as a practice and as an idea. As Schmelzer et al. [2022] argue, “consumption and culture themselves should be seen as a site of capitalist domination that must be addressed collectively — in addition to and beyond addressing exploitation in the workplace or ecological degradation alone”.

Kallis [2017: 76] suggests that “[c]onsumerism became the pleasure and meaning offered by capitalism”. Thus, degrowth challenges the consumerist capitalist culture that equates an individual with their role as a consumer, reducing one’s being to economic activities. Through its anti-consumerist critique degrowth challenges this reductionist narrative of capitalism about human life as an economic life, a consumerist life. Instead, degrowth calls for refocusing well-being and human life in general away from consumption and towards relations, community, meaningful activities [D’Alisa et al., 2014]. Furthermore, by calling for reduced consumption, a more frugal lifestyle, degrowth calls for self-limitation. Although conceptually debated [Gómez-Baggethun, 2020], limits are an important concept in degrowth thought and are seen as essential to ensuring a future without growth and ecological destruction. In this sense, self-limitation is opposed to the idea of constant transcendence that underlies the idea of economic growth.

At the same time, by calling for a reduction of the importance of consumption in one’s life, degrowth also makes an attack on the meaningfulness narrative that capitalism and consumerism rely on — the narrative about individualised meaning creation (the meaning-in-life take on meaningfulness, as was discussed in Chapter 1). A culture in which the idea of an individualised search for meaning has been broadly popularised and has become a norm offers a fruitful ground for capitalism to flourish and offer ever new solutions, in the form of goods and services, for creating meanings.

The degrowth attack on consumerism does not necessarily imply full rejection of the narrative of individualised meaning creation, but it definitely does challenge the idea of individualised creation of meaning primarily through consumption and market relations. However, can degrowth achieve this while the narrative of meaning as an individual project remains unchallenged and the opportunities for creating it via market are easily accessible (at least, to many in the Global North, where a major share of ecological

impacts originate from) and offer almost instantaneous gratification? And what does degrowth offer as an alternative to the pleasures of infinite opportunities for self-creation — and, hence, meaning-creation — that consumerism offers?

2.4 Degrowth for a good life for all

Probably the most well-known slogan of the degrowth movement is ‘a good life for all’. It has been used as the title of the Global Degrowth Day,⁹ which is held every year in June to celebrate alternatives to a growth-based society. The idea of ‘a good life’, and specifically ‘a good life for all’, is central to the degrowth vision of a better socioeconomic system, and the phrase ‘a good life for all’ has become a shorthand encapsulating the objectives of degrowth as a movement and a political project. Thus, Barbara Muraca [2012: 544] suggests that “degrowth sets a ‘good life’ as a goal”. In degrowth, therefore, the idea of the ‘goodness’ of a life, i.e., how good the life under a particular socioeconomic system is, is used as a parameter for evaluating the quality of that system. This aligns with one of the objectives of degrowth critique — to refocus economic thinking and practice on human well-being, and away from the objectives of financial profit and economic growth as proxies of well-being. Thus, when talking about socioeconomic systems, degrowth places at the centre of its analysis the value of human life and the importance of living a good life, arguing that the objective of a socioeconomic system should be to provide a good life to all, or at least to as many people as possible. Arguing that everyone deserves to live a good life, degrowth links its vision of a good life with the issue of justice. Thus, degrowth seeks to repoliticise both the existing narratives about the economy and the narratives about human life, rehumanising economics. As Abazeri [2022] argues: “By bringing up deeply normative questions such as ‘What is the good life?’, degrowth addresses all of us as active, society-shaping citizens, rather than consumers [...].”

In the well-being literature more broadly, there exists a lack of conceptual clarity around such concepts as ‘good life’ and ‘well-being’. The notion ‘good life’ has received particularly little attention in literature compared to other related concepts [Carlquist et al., 2017]. Carlquist et al. [2017], suggest that the term ‘good life’ has a distinct meaning and

⁹ An annual, self-organised celebration of local degrowth initiatives and communities.

presupposes a focus on the whole life and its quality. However, sometimes 'good life' is used interchangeably with such terms as 'well-being' and 'happiness'.

Degrowth literature, in its turn, tend to focus on the good life and well-being narratives rather than, for example, happiness. As Koch et al. [2017] point out, happiness has been denied as a concept of preference by progressive environmental movements due to the fact that happiness as an emotion and value has been exploited for the purposes of capitalist functioning, for example, to make employees work more not through coercion but rather through the positive affect. Thus, happiness can be a tool reinforcing the soft power of capitalism. However, both well-being and good life can be and have been exploited by capitalism as well. Thus, capitalism relies on a certain vision of a good life, promising that an improved quality of life can be achieved through work, higher income, through development and progress. While capitalism promises a good life, however, in practice for the majority this good life remains unattainable. Although capitalism relies on a certain vision of a good life and this vision makes part of its cultural power, just as much as the idea of happiness, the idea of a good life is not denied by degrowth, and, on the contrary, is embraced, whereas the relationship with the idea of happiness within degrowth literature is more problematic [Koch et al., 2017].

As was mentioned above, among other similar concepts, good life is the least defined one. Therefore, it could be that, given it has been used less and, hence, is less loaded with meanings, good life as a concept offers a better canvas for painting a degrowth vision of a more sustainable and just socioeconomic system. Another reason the concept of a good life is more acceptable from the degrowth point of view than happiness could be the existence of its hispanophone counterpart, the concept of *buen vivir*. Buen vivir, or living well, was translated from the Quechua term *Sumak kawsay*, which in its turn is a neologism invented in the 1990s by intellectuals involved in the development sector in Latin America to propose an alternative-to-capitalist vision of development that would be rooted in the Indigenous values [Kothari et al., 2019]. The concept gained significant political traction in Latin America, but also has served as an inspiration for Western socioecological movements such as degrowth [D'Alisa et al., 2014; Kothari et al., 2019].

Despite the attention that the concept of a good life has received in degrowth thought, it has not been very clearly defined. The debates about the content of the concept from the degrowth perspective have in particular touched upon the question of whether the

'goodness' of a life should be conceptualised around basic needs [Koch et al., 2017] or capabilities [Muraca, 2012]. However, further clarification of the degrowth framing of the concept appears important for understanding degrowth as a movement and a utopian vision as well as the values that it is grounded in. Moreover, narratives about what it means to live a good life contain in them narratives about human life in general and the values they are associated with, for example, whether a good life is a life lived for work, for pleasure, for self-expression, for self-realisation, or a life lived in relationality, in harmony with nature or something else. Hence, they also contain judgements related to the understanding of the purpose and meaning of human life.

Trying to clarify how the concept of a good life is understood within the degrowth movement, Viviana Asara and I conducted a survey in 2023. A detailed analysis of the data is to be presented in a separate publication, while here, in relation to the topic of the present thesis, a few findings can be highlighted.

2.5 Survey on degrowth and a good life

The survey was conducted at the 9th International Degrowth conference in Zagreb in August–September 2023, and online via degrowth-related mailing lists in September–November 2023. Through the survey, we sought to address the following research question: how does the degrowth community understand the concept of a good life? This was an exploratory survey that aimed at exploring some key concepts that are associated with the topic of a good life in degrowth literature, as well as some concepts from the Indigenous worldview that came up in the present PhD project. It is important to keep in mind that analysing such concepts as a good life using the survey method has its limitations (which has also been pointed out by some respondents). Nonetheless, the findings of the survey can be useful to highlight some common themes, as well as to offer directions for further research and debate on the topic.

The questionnaire consisted of a total of 15 questions on the topic, and 8 questions about the respondents. Single-choice, multiple-choice, Likert-scale-based and open-ended questions were included in the survey in order to capture various aspects of the concept. The questions in the first part of the survey covered the following topics related to a good life: material, social, political, ecological and personal aspects of a good life; values

associated with living a good life; conceptualisation and communication of the notion of a good life in degrowth literature; feasibility of achieving a good life for all; role of various actors in ensuring a good life for all; conditionality of a good life; and the issue of freedom.

A total of 246 responses were collected. Among the respondents, 79% identified European countries as their countries of residence and 72% as their countries of origin. The biggest age group (38%) was 25–34 years of age. In terms of the gender balance, 52% respondents identified as male, 42% as female and 6% as other, including non-binary, gender questioning and transgender. In terms of education, 77% stated to have a postgraduate degree. Most people identified their political views on the left end of the spectrum, although there were a few people who placed themselves closer to central-right.

Some of the findings from the survey that can be help understand the degrowth narratives of a good life and also of meaningfulness are outlined below.

First, the vision of a good life shared by degrowthers, as expected, revolves around ecological and social life. Thus, living a good life from the degrowth perspective means living in and preserving a healthy ecology and in connection with a community that is based on the principles of equality and care. Thus, the degrowth vision of a good life is relational, with the understanding of relationality first of all focused on social relations, but also extending into the environment. This vision is also opposed to the capitalist vision of a good life in the sense that it is less materialist. However, it is not post-materialist [Inglehard, 1981] and also recognises the importance of material comfort, although does not attribute too much importance to it. The aspect of a good life that was most agreed-upon among the respondents was the satisfaction of basic needs (see Figure 1). While, as has been mentioned above, there is disagreement in degrowth literature on whether the focus should be on needs versus capabilities when defining a good life [Koch et al., 2017; Muraca, 2012], both approaches suggest an aspiration on the part of degrowth literature to ensure a certain level of social provisioning that would offer conditions for a dignified life to all, or at least to as many people as possible. Thus, the purpose of an economy, from the degrowth perspective, is to provide a certain level of safety to each member of society. This way, degrowth challenges the meritocratic philosophy of capitalism, under which a dignified life is to be earned, first of all, through an economic contribution to society. On the contrary, degrowth argues that everyone has the natural

right to a dignified life [D'Alisa et al., 2014]. At the same time, as was pointed out by a number of respondents, this does not suggest that a contribution to society is not expected from its members.

Therefore, while taking into account individual variation among responses, there is a certain shared vision in terms of the key elements and values associated with a good life as per the degrowth framework. This vision serves as a cultural and political tool for challenging capitalism and, this way, contests capitalism on the plane of our collective understandings of what it means to be a human and live a human life. It can be said that, compared to capitalism, degrowth puts forward a de-economised, repoliticised, resocialised and rehumanised narrative about human life.

Second, one of the values that received most support among the respondents as associated with a good life is meaningfulness. When the respondents were asked to evaluate certain values as important in their own life, meaningfulness was rated as very important (69%) by more respondents than any other of the proposed values (simple living, ecological living, political living, convivial living, happy living and spiritual living; the respondents also could propose their own options) (see Figure 2b). When the respondents were asked to evaluate the same values as important, or not, from the perspective of the degrowth vision of a good life, meaningfulness was the second most agreed-upon value (78% of respondents stated that it is very important) after ecological living (84%) (see Figure 2a). Although the topic of meaningfulness, is rarely explicitly addressed in degrowth literature, as has been discussed above, these findings suggest that it appears very important to degrowth and its utopian vision, and probably also other socioecological movements offering systemic critique. Therefore, the topic of meaningfulness, even though it can be considered too philosophical and lying outside of the primary scope of degrowth critique, requires further conceptualisation from the degrowth perspective.

Third, according to the findings, a rather low percentage of respondents believe that connection to a place is important to living a good life, with the following responses: 1% believe that it is not important, 8% that it is of little importance, 48% that it is rather important, 41% that it is very important, and 2% chose the 'no opinion' option (Figure 1). While, generally speaking, the percentage of 'very important' responses is high, the category 'connection to a place' has one of the lowest percentages compared to other

categories that were included in that question. Thus, it comes behind (in the following order from the highest to the lowest percentage of 'very important' responses): satisfaction of basic needs, healthy ecology, preservation of nature and non-human life, connection to a community, social equality, access to public services, leisure time, meaningful work, ability to impact political decision-making, capability to realise one's potential and continuation of human life through new generations (see Figure 1). Thus, the category 'connection to a place' comes ahead only of the following three categories, which are expectedly not popular among degrowthers (in the following order): material comfort, satisfaction of non-essential wants, and high personal income. This finding stresses the importance of reflecting on the perceptions of localism in degrowth community, which appears to be very different from the Indigenous framings of localism, as will be discussed in the next sections.

Fourth, out of the total of seven values that were tested for their importance to living a good life (simple living, ecological living, political living, convivial living, happy living, meaningful living and spiritual living), the topic of spirituality was the most disagreed upon (see Figures 2a & 2b). Almost as many respondents believe that spirituality is not important or of little importance to living a good life as that it is very important or rather important — both from the degrowth and individual perspective. From the perspective of the degrowth vision of a good life, 20% of respondents believe that spiritual living is very important, 37% that it is rather important, 26% that it is of little importance and 5% that it is not important at all, and 11% replied 'don't know' (Figure 2a). When replying to the question from the personal perspective, i.e., about the values that the respondents follow in their own lives, the results were as follows: 19% believe that spiritual living is very important, 30% that it is rather important, 27% that it is of little importance, 22% that is not important at all and 2% replied 'don't know' (Figure 2b). No other value among the tested ones received such a wide spread of responses.

This difficult relationship with the topic of spirituality, on the one hand, could reflect the variety of opinions within the degrowth movement as has been described by Eversberg and Schmelzer [2018] based on a survey conducted at the degrowth conference in Leipzig in 2014. On the other hand, the topic of spirituality has been majorly overlooked in degrowth literature in general, although it has been mentioned by some authors [e.g., Flipo, 2017]. In the coming chapters that are reflecting on the understanding of the topic of meaningfulness from the perspective of the Indigenous worldview, I will explore the

place of spirituality in the Indigenous perceptions of the place of a human in this world. Reflecting on these differences between degrowth as a critical movement offering an alternative to and trying to unthink and unmake capitalism [Feola, 2019] and the Indigenous worldview that developed in societies functioning based on principles completely different from those of capitalism can help look at degrowth from another perspective, identifying the points where its critique needs further conceptualisation. Spirituality can be one of those critical points.

Finally, one of the findings suggests that there is disagreement among respondents about whether capitalism also aims for a good life, with some respondents believing that it also does aim for a good life, but only for a few, whereas others argue that capitalism does not at all. This suggests that it is important to differentiate between the narrative and the practice of a good life. In the context of the capitalist imaginary, the narrative is that of a good life for all, i.e., it promises a better quality of life to all (the optimism element in Berlant's cruel optimism). However, in practice it offers a good life only to a few. Within the context of critical theories, such as degrowth, it seems important to recognise this discrepancy and make a distinction between the utopian vision of a good life (also as a political tool) and the practice of it.

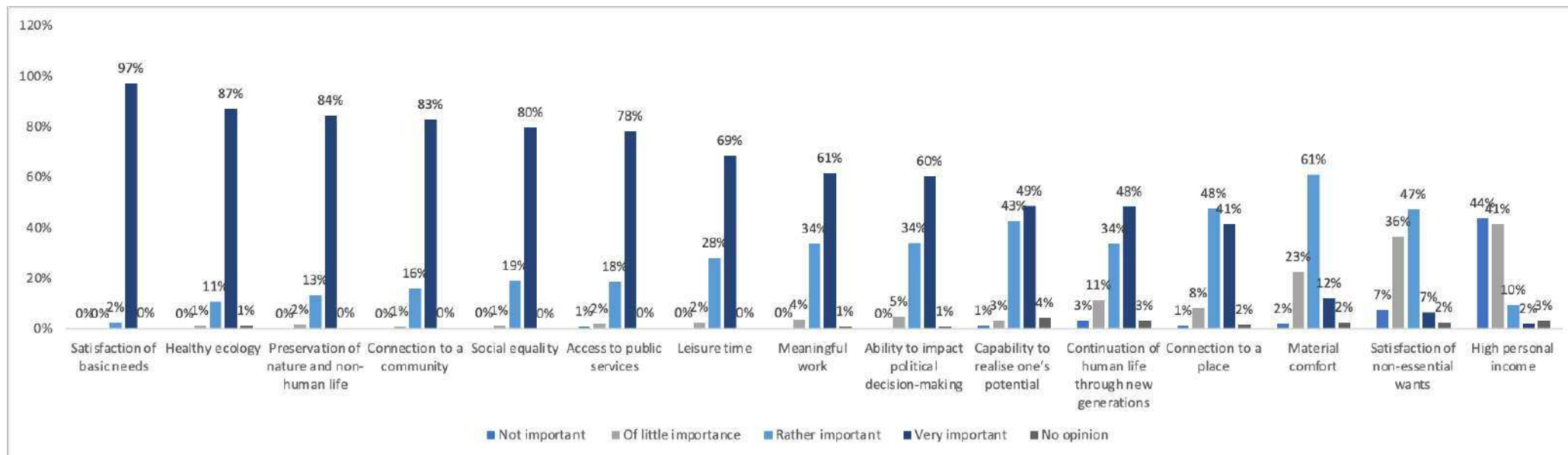


Figure 1. Findings of the survey on degrowth and a good life: Which aspects are important to living a good life?

Source: Lopatina & Asara [forthcoming].

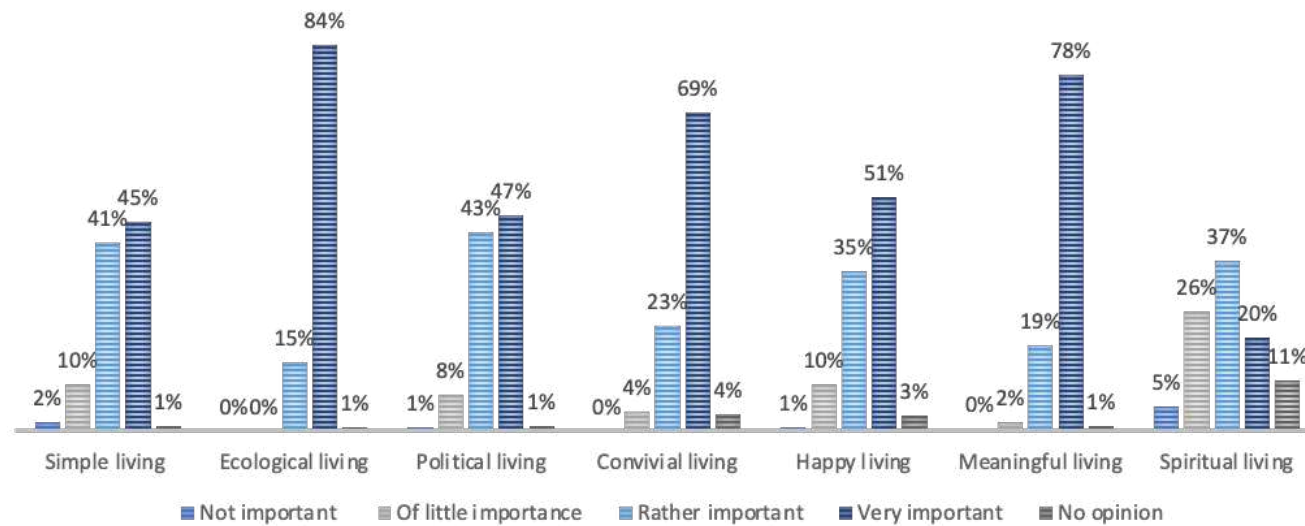


Figure 2a. **Findings of the survey on degrowth and a good life: Which values are central to the degrowth vision of a good life?**

Source: Lopatina & Asara [forthcoming].

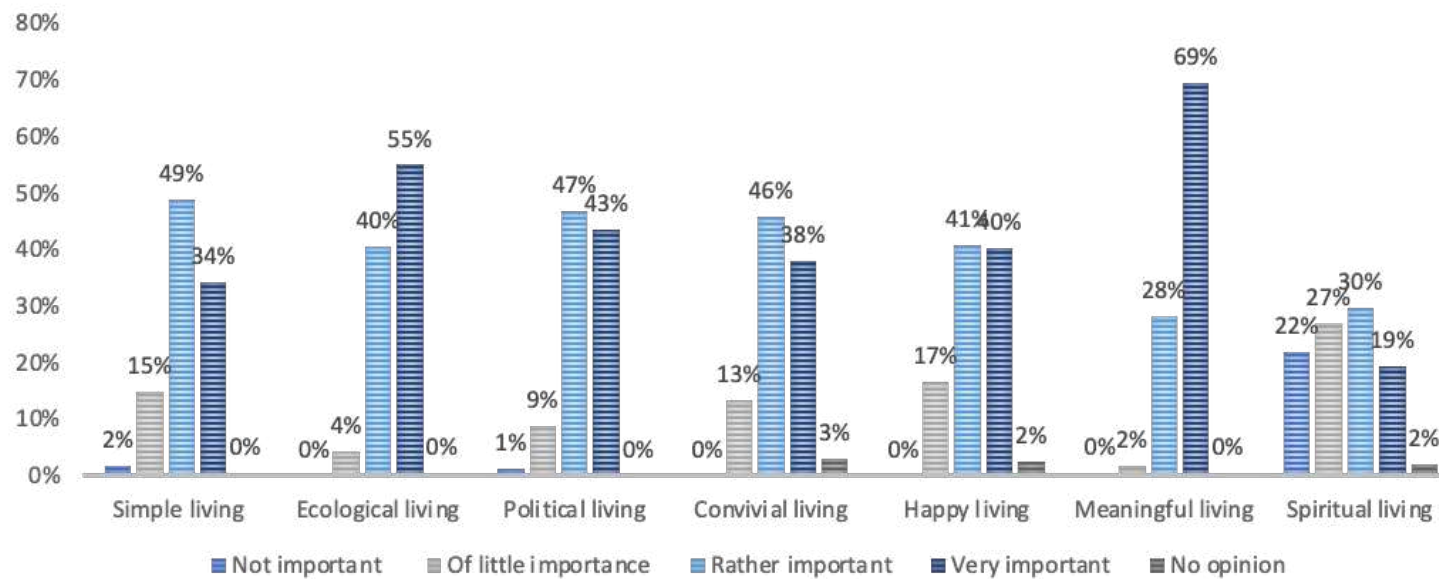


Figure 2b. Findings of the survey on degrowth and a good life: Which of these values do you follow in your own life?

Source: Lopatina & Asara [forthcoming].

2.6 Dépense

As the above sections suggest, the degrowth critique of the growth-oriented, capitalist societies touches upon the topic of meaningfulness, but usually in indirect ways. One rare exception is the concept of *dépense*, which has been studied and promoted by a small number of degrowth authors, particularly, Onofrio Romano [2019], Giacomo D'Alisa, Giorgos Kallis and Federico Demaria [in D'Alisa et al., 2014]. This concept, however, has multiple dimensions and is probably better known to degrowthers as an economic concept, rather than a concept related to the meaning of human life. Also, although it is uniquely philosophical and even somewhat mystical (or maybe due to this), this concept remains on the margins of degrowth thought. As some of the conversations I have had with degrowthers show, by far not every member of the degrowth community is familiar with it.

Dépense translates from French as 'expenditure', and in degrowth literature it has been used in a more specific sense, meaning 'unproductive expenditure'. Moreover, the use of the French term is rather specific to degrowth literature, whereas elsewhere the English version of the term is usually used. The concept itself originates from the work of twentieth-century French thinker Georges Bataille, primarily the text *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* [1988]. Impacted by surrealism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and mysticism, Bataille sought to challenge dogmas and rationality of the Western societies. Although not an economist, and to many better known rather as an essayist, novelist and a philosophical theorist, in *The Accursed Share*, Bataille set off to reject the economic rationality, developing the theory of a general economy. It was Bataille's critique of capitalist growth (although he is offering an even harsher critique of the growthism of the planned economy of the Soviet Union) and of the scarcity logic of mainstream economic thought that attracted degrowth thinkers to that text, inspiring a proposal to frame degrowth as *dépense* [D'Alisa et al., 2014].

In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille seeks to expand the common understanding of the economy to include also the abundance of energy flows, which, according to Bataille, is the primary factor driving socioeconomic activities. Thus, Bataille's theory of a general economy, as opposed to the mainstream economic thinking (particularly at the time when Bataille was developing the theory) takes account of the energy flows feeding economic activities. It is important to clarify, however, that Bataille uses the word energy in a brought

and rather fluid sense, and, for the sake of simplicity, I would suggest that it could be broadly understood as resources. Thus, Bataille suggests that the Earth enjoys an abundance of energy due to the abundant energy coming from the sun. The life forms existing on the planet cannot consume all of that energy, therefore, there always exists some energy surplus. This surplus, in its turn, creates pressure as it needs to be wasted, expended. It is this excess, Bataille argues, that drives life towards complexity of both living forms and activities that those forms engage in. Using Bataille's words: "The sexual act is in time what the tiger is in space" [1988]. This suggests that, in the logic of Bataille's general economy, both a tiger and a sexual act do not need to exist as much simpler and less energy-intensive ways of reproducing life could be found. Both tigers and sexual acts represent complex forms of wasting surplus energy and are outcomes of the natural abundance. Therefore, following Bataille's logic, surplus is a driving force of life, which results in life's exuberance.

In addition to these biological implications, Bataille argues that the principle of surplus also applies to societies and their economic activities. Any community, according to this logic, always has at its possession an excess of resources. This surplus calls to be acted upon, it needs to be wasted, and, thus, creates a certain pressure, an anxiety. Every society finds its own solution for how to go about this surplus, and this way, according to Bataille, it creates itself, its culture and its economy. For example, Bataille compared the Islamic states that channelled their surplus into military expansion and Tibet where the excess resources were used to sustain a class of monks. In general, as Bataille points out, in most cases the surplus is used for growth — whether demographic or other.

Under capitalism, however, Bataille argues, the natural flow of wasting is disrupted and little 'true' wasting actually takes place. Following the capitalist logic, most of the surplus is reinvested back into ever new means of production, which leads to the production of even more surplus, which, in its turn, is also invested into new means of production. This way the surplus continues to grow, and, as it does not get wasted, it creates ever more pressure in societies. Eventually, Bataille insists, this surplus will get destroyed anyway, however, in ways that are destructive to societies, i.e., in wars, such as the First and the Second World Wars. To prevent such catastrophic outcomes, Bataille calls for restoring the natural balance and introducing more wasting into economies. This has to be 'true' wasting in the sense that it leads to complete destruction of resources instead of reinvesting them into productive activities. This is what *dépense* is, truly unproductive.

Bataille's general economy is an interesting example of a theory that is difficult to operationalise, as it easily falls apart if you try to break it down [Sørensen, 2012]. Nonetheless, it offers valuable critique of capitalism and economic thought in general, and an interesting lens for thinking about economic activities and human life more broadly. There are a few points in Bataille's theory that make it relevant to degrowth thought. First of all, Bataille's theory makes one think about the economy in terms very different from the way it is commonly understood. Thus, Bataille's general economy challenges the mainstream economic thinking rooted in the principle of scarcity, where the main challenge is to meet needs of many with limited means. Conversely, Bataille suggests that the problem is not scarcity, but, on the contrary, surplus, and that the main problem is finding a way to deal with it. And this is particularly the case under capitalism.

As Onofrio Romano [2015] suggests, “[d]épense is a key concept, then, for theorizing a way out of the growth society”. Thus, Romano in *Towards a Society of Degrowth* [2019] as well as Kallis et al. in *Degrowth: Vocabulary for a New Era* [D’Alisa et al., 2014], put forward a proposal that the capitalist economy can be slowed down by increasing the amount of unproductive wasting, i.e., dépense. From the degrowth perspective it is important that this wasting has to be collective as opposed to the individualised wasting of consumerism that capitalism relies on. Appropriate forms of wasting, thus, could be collective feasts and carnivals, for example. However, Luigi Pellizzoni points out the problematic relationship of the concept with the idea of ecological limits as dépense is about “orgiastic excess, doing more and else, rather than turning the same, or less, to different purposes” [2020]. Moreover, Pellizzoni suggests that organising leisure activities can also be lucrative and, hence, does not necessarily burn capital out. Elsewhere I explored this idea [Lopatina, 2020] looking at a few examples of waste-based, festive economies. These examples show that festive economies, instead of negating it, can interact with the capitalist logic, subjugating it to its needs, while at the same time promoting economic growth. Therefore, one of the problems with the proposal for dépense-based degrowth is the question of the scale of wasting and the relationship between waste and production. Just wasting on its own, without simultaneously downscaling production, will not significantly slow down the economy, and, on the contrary, can boost its growth further.

At the same time, there is also another dimension of Bataille's theory that connects it to degrowth and specifically the question of meaningfulness. It is what Bataille termed sovereignty [1988]. Bataille suggested that surplus is the domain where meaning is created. What exists before humans have to interact with the surplus is the part that is needed to meet basic needs, to survive. This domain, according to Bataille is the domain of survival, needfulness, servility and animality. It is predefined. What lies beyond is the domain of sovereignty, where one has to decide how to spend the surplus, and this way becomes a sovereign, a creator. According to Bataille, it is in this needless domain beyond need and survival that we find the real human life, which consists of creating oneself and one's meaning. Thus, the real life is the life of a (self-)creator. Following Bataille's logic, therefore, there is no meaning in the domain of needs and survival. Picking up this line of thought, D'Alisa et al. [2014] and Romano [2019] have used Bataille's theory to develop a degrowth framing of meaningfulness based on a collective festive and wasteful economy. As Kallis et al. [in D'Alisa et al., 2014] argue, "finding the meaning of life individually is an anthropological illusion". Moreover, it "leads to ecologically harmful and socially unjust outcomes since it cannot be sustained for everyone" [ibid.]. As opposed to the individualised search for meaning through personalised *dépense* (i.e., consumerism) and drawing on Bataille's theory of sovereignty, they suggest that "once basic needs have been secured, it is in deciding collectively 'what to *dépense*' that a sense of the 'good life' can be constructed and the political of a new era be liberated. The realm of meaning starts where the realm of necessity ends" [D'Alisa et al., 2014].

The framing of meaningfulness around *dépense* that degrowth scholars have put forward calls for bringing the search for meaning from the individual sphere back into communities and linking it to a festive economy. Thus, this framing challenges the mainstream narrative of individualised meaning creation (the meaning-in-life narrative as discussed in Chapter 1), while at the same time making a connection between the topic of meaningfulness and the economy. It establishes a connection between the spheres of life that are commonly disconnected in the Western perception — economic and existential. It, thus, runs against the compartmentalisation of spheres of human life that is typical to the Western way of thinking. In this sense, there are parallels between this degrowth framing of meaningfulness and the Indigenous worldview (as will be discussed in Chapter 3), which sees all aspects of human life, including social, cultural, political and economic, as interconnected and interdependent [Jobin, 2023].

Although this *dépense*-based degrowth vision challenges the dominant Western perceptions of human life and meaningfulness that are closely intertwined with capitalism and the ideas of growth and development, there are, nonetheless, a few issues with Bataille's sovereignty theory that need to be highlighted. While aiming to connect the human to their animalistic nature, Bataille's thinking remains extremely binary when it assigns meaningfulness to the domain lying beyond this animality, i.e., to the domain of the need-free being where the basic needs are met. In this sense, *dépense* still offers an anthropocentric vision of human life. I would also argue that it is androcentric as, by prioritising the sovereignty of creativity beyond needs it devalues the domain of reproduction of human life, which has in many societies been taken care of by women [Lopatina, 2020]. Therefore, the degrowth vision of *dépense* falls short in its critique of capitalism and the dominant Western worldview, also in relation to the topic of human life. Moreover, as Pellizzoni [2020] argues, the notion of *dépense* "is possibly too focused on the actualization of human potential to offer ground for a renewed environmental politics." In this sense, it reproduces transcendent narratives of meaningfulness that also make part of the capitalist imaginary, as was discussed above.

While it is important to be aware of these shortcomings of the theory of *dépense*, Bataille should be recognised as a critical figure both to degrowth and critique of capitalism more broadly. Bataille's thought might be not easy — as in too mystical and too philosophical — for degrowth to embrace. However, specifically thanks to these aspects, it allows stepping beyond the logic of rationalism and compartmentalisation that underly both capitalism and the dominant Western worldview. Thus, Norman O. Brown [1991: 185] writes that "Bataille's special contribution is to show the connection between the mystic vision, 'the apotheosis of the perishable,' and the economic system. In so doing, he gave us a first sketch of [the] post-Marxist science of political economy." Brown [1991: 183] also argues that "[i]t takes a madman like Bataille, and a libertine like Bataille, to challenge the homeostatic pleasure-principle in terms of another definition of pleasure and another definition of life." The vision of meaningfulness that *dépense* offers is anti-utilitarian and challenges the focus of the economy on the preservation of life alone. What Bataille's theory of surplus does is challenge the idea of scarcity itself, blurring the line between the necessary and wasteful, recognising waste as necessary. Thus, it turns the economic logic upside-down. Onofrio Romano [2019] argues that Bataille's work is critical to degrowth and other environmental movements that tend to be stuck in the mentality of

scarcity and limit their understanding of the good life to the task of meeting basic needs and, hence, do not accept wastefulness, which also makes part of what it means to be human, as the history of societies from across the world and across centuries shows. Thus, denouncing the logic of scarcity that is typical of classical economics, *dépense* offers an anti-utilitarian vision of human life and meaningfulness, which is important to be considered by such movements as degrowth. However, it appears critical for degrowth to address the gaps in the theory of *dépense*, particularly through decolonial and feminist critique.

2.7 Feminist and decolonial takes on degrowth

Challenging the dominant economic narratives, as well as narratives about human life more broadly, as we have seen above, degrowth positions itself in opposition to mainstream economic thought. The alternative economic vision degrowth puts forward is rooted in such values as autonomy, equality, justice, conviviality and ecological sustainability, which are seen as integral elements of building a future where everyone can live a good life [D'Alisa et al., 2014]. This radical and critical position of degrowth in relation to the capitalist system implies active questioning of the existing system, which is eventually to lead to its unthinking and unmaking [Feola, 2019]. In this sense, the idea of decolonisation of the imaginary [Latouche, 2015] is central to the degrowth project. At the same time, the task of decolonising the imaginary should involve taking a critical stance towards the movement itself as well. This should include critically reflecting on the positionality of its members, on the potential and actual biases embedded in the promoted values, and on how these biases might be shaping the community and its agenda. As Abazeri [2022] points out, “as a conceptual framework and political mobiliser” degrowth creates expectations and mental representations of the future, thus, influencing present decisions. By drawing an idea of an alternative-to-capitalism future, degrowth shapes not only the movement itself, but also wider debates, social and economic initiatives, other movements and political decisions. Therefore, being critical and radical for degrowth should also mean being self-reflective and self-critical.

Critique of degrowth and its proposals has been voiced from both within and outside the movement. This critique could roughly be divided into two categories: 1) degrowth is too radical, and 2) degrowth is not radical enough on certain aspects. The first category is

represented by the voices arguing that degrowth proposals are not feasible, will bring about collective misery and poverty, and/or, put in simplistic terms, that degrowth calls for a return 'back to the caves'. This kind of critique has been extensively addressed by degrowth scholars [e.g., Parrique, 2019]. Here, it is more pertinent to look at the second category of critique, which spotlights gaps in degrowth analysis and perspectives.

The focus of many authors whose critique can be placed within the second category is commonly to add further critical lenses to degrowth analysis enriching its perspective, rather than negating the degrowth project altogether. Therefore, the objective is to build intersectionality into the degrowth framework. As Dengler and D'Alisa [2021] put it, "Our Degrowth is Intersectional!" The key perspectives that have been used by the authors for this critique are feminism and decoloniality, from which, it is suggested, degrowth can learn a lot. This critique suggests that achieving the socioecological transformation that degrowth envisions would not be possible without taking the feminist and decolonial perspectives into account, i.e., without putting care, reproduction and justice at the centre of the degrowth project.

From the feminist perspective, as Dengler and Saave-Harnack [2019] argue, degrowth needs to recognise the patriarchal roots of "the capitalist growth dictate" and, taking account of the parallels existing between the exploitation of social and ecological reproduction, "make them a key component of its struggle". The critique from the decolonial perspective, in its turn, has pointed out the Eurocentrism of degrowth. Thus, Muradian [2019], argues that degrowth proposals of self-limitation evade not only the dynamics of gender, but also the dynamics of colonialism, race and class. This creates the risk to further anchor "white/European, middle-class histories, epistemes and ontologies within the movement" [Abazeri, 2022: 1]. Therefore, these authors call for degrowth to "adopt a more critical social lens" [ibid.] that would take account of the racial, class and gender dynamics and challenge not only the ideology of growth, but also the coloniality of power and modernity "that enables global Eurocentered capitalist world structures to persist" [ibid.: 2]. Therefore, the task for degrowth in this regard, is to avoid falling "into the trap of playing down the challenge of patriarchy" [Dengler & Saave-Harnack, 2019] and "the trap of reproducing (neo)-colonial continuities" [Dengler & Seerbacher, 2019: 246].

Despite the efforts made by feminist and decolonial scholars to integrate these lenses into the degrowth framework, at the moment, it cannot be said yet that they are integral to degrowth [Dengler & Seebacher, 2019]. Further work should include “dismantling false and exclusive (mostly Eurocentric) universalisms” [ibid.] by “look[ing] outside Eurocentric frames of being and relating” [Abazeri, 2022: 5] and “including heterogeneous voices and perspectives from other lived realities both in the Global South and the Global North alike” [Dengler & Seebacher, 2019]. Degrowth should also connect more with feminist and decolonial literature with its long history of critique of capitalism and the underlying power relations [ibid.; Dengler & D’Alisa, 2021]. Another important task is to reflect on the issue of diversity within the movement itself [Bonelli et al., 2023] and how it might shape its proposals.

Abazeri [2022] emphasises that it is important to think of the economy in terms of the history and the social structures that maintain it. This is also applicable to degrowth. In the case of degrowth as a movement that offers a critical economic vision, this suggests that reflecting on the movement’s situatedness and partiality also implies reflecting on how those structures and histories, including the histories of concepts, reproduce themselves within degrowth and its agenda. Thus, this critique invites us to think about degrowth as a continuum of concepts, ideas and social structures that extend across the past, present and future and connect degrowth to structures of discrimination and oppression as well as other political movements and currents of thought. Taking on such a critical position informed by the feminist and decolonial perspectives also applies to the topic of meaningfulness. Reflecting on how degrowth narrates and potentially shapes collective framings and practices of meaningfulness and meaning-creation should include considering the past, present and future of these ideas in the Global North as well as alternative framings that exist in other contexts, as the narratives about human life that degrowth places at the centre of its critique of capitalism, shape the possible futures that it delineates in the collective imagination. In the coming chapters, I further develop this reflection by drawing on the works of Indigenous thinkers and the Ulchi culture.

Conclusion

The topic of meaningfulness might be seen as too philosophical for degrowth to engage with. Indeed, so far, it has remained majorly on the fringe or rather outside of the focus of

degrowth thought. However, this does not mean that degrowth does not rely on certain narratives about meaningfulness, meaning creation and human life more broadly in its critique of growth-oriented capitalism. The degrowth vision of a good life for all paints a particular picture of what it means to be human, of what is valuable in human life — living in a community, in harmony with nature, in equality and through autonomy. At the same time, degrowth critique challenges the narratives of meaningfulness that capitalism relies on — the narrative of development and transcendence, and the narrative of self-actualisation through consumption and market-based activities.

Through this critique, degrowth seeks to create an economy that cares about the well-being of its members. Thus, it can be said that the degrowth vision of meaningfulness is collective and ecological. At the same time, it is important to reflect on the conceptual and structural past and present of degrowth, which will shape its and broader collective future, including through the narratives of meaningfulness. The following chapter will look at the topic of meaningfulness from the perspective of the Indigenous worldview, which can help enrich the ontological and epistemological critique of degrowth and extend its theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 3. Indigenous worldview and meaningfulness

I tell my students that if at the conclusion of my course they do not believe that Jesus died for your dog, they need to think again about the nature of their creation theology.

Terry LeBlanc, *Native American Theology*

Nothing that we do, do we do by ourselves. We do not see by ourselves. We do not hear by ourselves. We do not breathe by ourselves, eat, drink, defecate, piss, or fart by ourselves. We do not think, dream, invent or procreate by ourselves. We do not die by ourselves.

Jack B. Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*

This chapter offers an overview of debates around the definition of the term ‘Indigenous’ (section 3.1) and of the Indigenous worldview (section 3.2). This is followed by an analysis of the land-based ways of being and thinking that are at the centre of the Indigenous worldview (section 3.3.), as well as of the narratives of meaningfulness that can be found in literature on the Indigenous ways of being (section 3.4). The chapter ends with an overview of some key principles of engaging with and learning from Indigenous knowledge systems (section 3.5).

Seeking to give an overview of the Indigenous worldview the way it is understood in Indigenous cultures, in this chapter I am specifically drawing on texts written by Indigenous authors.¹⁰ Many Indigenous thinkers have written about the Indigenous ways of being and knowing, and have done so in very powerful ways. Often, their choices of words and forms of narration in themselves carry many teachings about Indigenous

¹⁰ Some of the themes discussed in this chapter, including the anthropocentrism and the human-nature dualism of the Western worldview, has also been challenged by a number of Western theoretical frameworks, e.g., deep ecology, ecofeminism, posthumanism, new materialism, queer ecology, etc. Some of the non-Indigenous authors who have written on these topics include Ingold [2000], Descola [2013], Tsing [2015], Haraway [2016]. A comprehensive comparison of these approaches with the critique of the Western worldview offered by Indigenous authors could offer interesting insights into the differences between the Indigenous and the Western worldview, which could be explored in future work.

values. Therefore, in this chapter, I use a lot of quotes from texts written by Indigenous authors, so that these teachings could come through on their own terms.

3.1 Defining ‘Indigenous’

The term ‘Indigenous’ is commonly used to refer to the original inhabitants of lands [Wilson, 2008]. However, no universally accepted definition of the term ‘Indigenous people’ exists. For example, the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) states that “the prevailing view today is that no formal universal definition of the term is necessary, given that a single definition will inevitably be either over- or underinclusive, making sense in some societies but not in others” [UN, 2009: 6–7]. Historically, the Indigenous status of a people was defined based on their experience of colonisation and marginalisation by a dominant group. However, as it is commonly recognised today, such definitions do not necessarily apply to every Indigenous community. For example, they might be less applicable in many parts of Asia and Africa [UN, 2009]. Furthermore, such definitions are considered reductionist as they define peoples as Indigenous first of all through their experience of oppression and their relationship with a dominant group, rather than on their own terms. Therefore, currently, the approach most commonly followed on the international level is to focus on the self-definition of peoples as Indigenous [ibid.].

While recognising the limitations of the attempts to give a single definition, UNPFII, nonetheless, recognises the practical need for having some defining terms, and proposes following the definition given in José R. Martínez Cobo’s Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations [Martínez Cobo, 1986/7: 10], which states the following:

“Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence

as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system”.

According to this definition, the historical continuity may include one or more of the following factors: occupation of ancestral lands, or part of them; common ancestry with the original occupants of the lands; culture in a broad sense; language; residence in a certain part of the country or world. As the definition suggests, this is a non-exclusive list of factors that can help define the Indigenous status of a people, and other parameters may exist. The difficulties associated with defining Indigenous Peoples suggest that it is important to acknowledge the great variety of experiences of Indigenous communities across the world, and that no unifying principles and criteria can be applied to their lived reality. For example, as the above-quoted definition by Shawn Wilson suggests, it is common to define Indigenous populations through their long-standing relationship with a particular land. However, this factor may be less applicable in some contexts. For example, some of the clans of the Ulchi Nation living in the Far East of Russia, whose worldview is explored in this thesis, moved to the land that is currently considered the Ulchi traditional land from other places (e.g., from Sakhalin or Mongolia) only a few centuries ago [Van Ysslestyne, 2018]. Nonetheless, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, all Ulchi traditionally lived in a strong connection with the land. As this example demonstrates, defining Indigenous Peoples through one single factor, such as the duration of living on the land, for instance, can be reductionist.

In addition to the international definitions of Indigenous Peoples, country-specific definitions may also exist. For example, in Russia, no general definition of Indigenous Peoples exists. The Russian law recognises the category of the small-numbered Indigenous Peoples, which applies to nations of up to 50,000 people that live on the traditional land of their ancestors, follow a traditional lifestyle (including economic activities and crafts) and self-identify as a separate ethnic group [State Duma, 1999]. According to this definition, the Russian State recognises 47 small-numbered Indigenous groups, as per the official list. However, this list has not been updated to include, for example, the small-numbered groups living in Dagestan, as stated in the Law. Furthermore, the definition also does not cover the nations with population exceeding 50,000 people, such as the Yakut, Tatar or Bashkir, for example.

When talking about the use of related terms in English, it should also be noted that some Indigenous people — collectively or individually — use other words to identify themselves, such as Aboriginal, Indian, Aborigine, First Nations, Native, etc. [Wilson, 2008]. The use of these terms is particular to each community or even person, and evolves over time. For example, whereas in Australia ‘Aboriginal’ is considered to be the generally accepted term to refer to the original populations of the continent, in Canada today it is considered derogatory. Usually, the term Indian is not seen as acceptable in the Canadian context nowadays either, while it was commonly used in the past, for example, as the name of the Indian Act [1985] suggests. At the same time, Indigenous people themselves in Canada might still be using the term ‘Indian’. In the Russian context, in addition to the Russian version of ‘Indigenous’, *коренные* [*korennyye*], it is also common to hear the term *националы* [*natsionaly*], which derives from the word ‘nation’.

Despite the difficulties associated with defining it, the term ‘Indigenous’, as Shawn Wilson [2008] points out, carries important political implications. As Wilson [2008: 16] argues, it is “inclusive of all first peoples”, denoting their common experiences and values. In this sense, it plays an important role in uniting Indigenous Peoples from across the world — including on the international political arena — in their diversity and at the same time in their shared struggles for their rights. In the global network of struggles against discrimination and oppression, the term ‘Indigenous’, thus, stands to represent some of the voices that resist the reality of the dominant system and its underlying power structures.

3.2 What is the Indigenous worldview?

In this and next sections, I am drawing on the works of Indigenous authors to offer an overview of what can be defined as the Indigenous worldview. The objective is to rely specifically on the works of Indigenous authors to outline how the values and ways of being that are shared by Indigenous communities around the world, i.e., what constitutes the Indigenous worldview and how it is different from the Western worldview, is understood by Indigenous people themselves, rather than to rely on reinterpretations. In anglophone literature, this topic can be attributed to the field of Indigenous studies, which is an interdisciplinary field of research that looks at the historical and modern experiences of Indigenous Peoples, including language, culture, history, politics, law, economics, etc.

Today, this is a fast-growing field of research, and within it, narrower fields are also emerging, such as, for example, Indigenous economics, Indigenous health and Indigenous law.

Defining the Indigenous worldview is not any easier than defining the word 'Indigenous'. When trying to learn about and from the Indigenous worldview, it can be useful to think in terms of its content, i.e., the values that it represents and its ontological and epistemological particularities, as well as in terms of the groups that carry this worldview. But, first of all, it is also important to reflect on the term 'worldview' itself. In the Western philosophical tradition, it was first used by Immanuel Kant (*Weltanschauung*) to describe sense perception of the world [1998 (1781)]. Later it spread among German thinkers, including Hegel, eventually becoming popular among Western thinkers more broadly. Thus, in Western thought, the term 'worldview' has been associated with the intellectual and intuitive dimensions of perception of the world around us.

Looking at the term 'worldview' from the Indigenous point of view, in the book *Restoring the Kinship Worldview: Indigenous Voices Introduce 28 Precepts for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth* [2022], Four Arrows and Narvaez argue that a different term is needed to refer to the Indigenous ways of knowing and being. As opposed to the Western worldview, the Indigenous worldview, as they argue, "is not a matter of perception or conception alone, but of *experiencing* and *being*" [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 2]. From the perspective of the Indigenous worldview, being is not only about 'seeing', but also about dozens of other senses that help humans "mov[e] through the world" [ibid.: 3]. The term 'worldview', thus, as they suggest, is too narrow to account for the Indigenous ways of being in the world and knowing it. That is why, instead of worldview, they propose the term 'world-sense', which is meant to denote not only intellectual perception, which is at the centre of the term 'worldview' in Western philosophy, but also an "integrative understanding of body, mind, and Spirit" [ibid.: 3]. Nonetheless, in the book, Four Arrows and Narvaez go on to use the term worldview. In this text I will be using both terms — worldview and world-sense — to refer to the Indigenous ways, and worldview to refer to the Western ways. Finally, since the focus of this overview is to outline the commonalities existing within each category discussed here, i.e., the Indigenous worldview, on the one hand, and the Western worldview, on the other hand, and to compare these two worldviews, the words 'worldview' and 'world-sense' will be mainly used in the singular

form. This, however, does not deny the diversity that exists within each category, as is further discussed below.

Another reason why defining the Indigenous worldview is not an easy task is the issue of using English for this purpose, instead of Indigenous languages. As has been pointed out by many Indigenous authors, English due to its structure fails to capture the nuances of the Indigenous ways of thinking and being. For example, Brian Burkhart [2019: 190], when outlining the Indigenous land-based ways of being, argues that using English to describe the Indigenous ontology is problematic because it implies “speaking about locality within a semantics of delocality”. One of the critical differences that is often pointed out by Indigenous thinkers from North America is the noun-based nature of English as opposed to verb-based Indigenous languages. For example, in a study by Reed et al. [2024], one expert suggested that Anishinaabemowin “... is really verb-based, so you don’t have *things*”. While “[...] in English, and the idea of Western-thinking, things are inanimate. In Anishinaabemowin, things are alive, they’re more than just alive, you know, there’s often things that are spiritual” [ibid.]. Thus, the way such concepts as land, well-being and gender, for example, are framed and named in English can drastically differ from Indigenous languages. Therefore, it is important to remember that many details and meanings might be lost in translation. For those who do not know Indigenous languages but would like to start learning from the Indigenous worldview, stories, through the power of metaphor [Archibald, 2008], offer an opportunity to immerse oneself in the Indigenous values. Although, of course, in this case meanings can still be lost as a result of translation. In addition, when drawing comparisons between Indigenous and Western concepts and/or aiming to make the Indigenous worldview comprehensible to a non-Indigenous audience, usually Western concepts are used as a starting point for understanding Indigenous concepts, which also leads to missing many layers of meaning. One example of this is the term ‘non-anthropocentric’, as will be discussed below.

In the book *Restoring the Kinship Worldview*, Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022], drawing on speeches and writings of Indigenous thinkers and leaders, outline 28 precepts that can help give an outline to the Indigenous worldview. Those precepts, as the authors suggest, are “guidelines for behaviour and living a good life” from the Indigenous point of view [ibid.: 4]. Those 28 precepts are informed by a longer list of 40 points that Four Arrows [2020] published in the book *The Red Road: Linking Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives to Indigenous Worldview*, contrasting the dominant and the Indigenous

worldview (e.g., Earth as an unloving 'it' versus Earth and all systems as living and loving). As the authors point out, neither list is exhaustive and more precepts might exist. Nonetheless, they are very helpful for those who are trying to understand the Indigenous worldview, and also those who hope to find (in it) an alternative to the dominant worldview.

The 28 precepts covered in Four Arrows and Narvaez's book include:

- "recognition of spiritual energies in nature;
- non-hierarchical society;
- courage and fearless trust in the universe;
- understanding/embracing death and dying;
- emphasis on community welfare;
- high respect for the sacred feminine;
- respect for gender role fluidity;
- non-materialistic barter, gift, and kinship economics;
- all Earth entities are sentient;
- the sacred nature of competition and games;
- non-anthropocentrism;
- words are sacred (truthfulness);
- mutual dependence;
- complementary duality;
- generosity as way of life;
- ceremony as life sustaining;
- humour as essential;
- conflict resolution as return to community;
- laws of nature as highest rules of living;
- becoming fully human;
- nature seen as benevolent;
- responsibility emphasis;
- connection to the land;
- centrality of gratitude;
- non-interference;
- circular time and knowledge;
- self-initiated relational healing;
- an emphasis on heart wisdom".

Among these precepts, it is possible to indicate those that are related to the Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, whereas others are about translating those foundational principles into practice. For the purposes of the discussion presented in this thesis, some precepts are particularly important for spotlighting some of the differences existing between the dominant and the Indigenous worldview, including:

- recognition of spiritual energies in nature and of all Earth entities as sentient;
- non-anthropocentrism;
- mutual dependence;
- laws of nature as highest rules of living;
- nature seen as benevolent;
- connection to the land;
- circular time and knowledge.

Although these principles can have unique manifestations in each community, it is striking that many Indigenous cultures across the world are rooted in the same foundational principles [Wilson, 2008; Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. Reflecting on the Indigenous worldview invites us to take into account this commonality, but also to be aware of the diversity of Indigenous cultures, thus, refraining from simplified pan-Indigenising approaches that see Indigenous Peoples as one homogenous group. This quote by Narvaez [in Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 112] offers a resolution to this seeming tension: “Indigenous spirituality is life giving, life honouring. It is an expression of the songs of creation — each people’s expression unique, but with the same underlying heartbeat of Mother Earth”. Or, as quoted in Wilson [2008: 92], “Indigenous is another word for human being. You know most of our Indigenous names from societies from all over the world are the people, the human beings, being human... when you factor in dialects, you come to about 10,000 Nations distributed rather equally around the world. So, you have Indigenous peoples born of the land within their context following not cultural norms but following foundational structures that are common to each other like the circle”.

Therefore, many Indigenous authors suggest that the Indigenous worldview, as it is rooted in the natural laws, can be seen as the most harmonious way for humans to relate to the world. Thus, Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022] refer to the Indigenous worldview as “our original” worldview, i.e., the worldview that was traditionally shared by all people on the planet. However, at the same time, going back to the question about who carries this worldview, it is important to recognise that today this worldview is not universal and is

kept, first of all, by Indigenous groups, which represent a minority. As Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 4-5] put it, the “‘Indigenous worldview’ does not belong to a race or group of people, but to Indigenous cultures who still hold on to their traditional place-based knowledge” and, hence, are “the wisdom keepers of this original Nature-based worldview”.

At the root of the Indigenous worldview is the recognition of all beings existing on Earth as alive and possessing subjectivity. The beings that are recognised as animate, within the Indigenous world-sense, include all the beings that are recognised as such within the Western worldview (i.e., animals, plants, insects, etc.), but also other beings which are seen as inanimate from the dominant Western point of view, including rocks, winds, rivers, mountains, planets, stars, etc. Moreover, this applies to both visible and invisible realms, for example, spirit beings. Although the perception of specific categories of beings may differ from culture to culture, in any case, the realm of what is recognised as animate from the Indigenous point of view is significantly wider and more diverse than is the case in the Western tradition.

In this non-discriminatory world-sense, every being has its own place and, through mutual connections and dependencies, is related to other beings. The same applies to humans, who are seen as elements of this complex web of relations. Importantly, humans are not seen as the most or more important beings than others. On the contrary, the human’s place in the world is commonly seen from the perspective of humility in the sense that humans, as a younger species on this planet, can benefit from the teachings of other species (or, non-human people, as they would be referred to in many traditions) that have been around for much longer than humans and, hence, know more about living on Earth than humans do. In Four Arrows and Narvaez’s words: “[t]he many who have been on Earth longer than our species are our teachers” [2022: 15]. Overall, life on Earth is seen as non-hierarchical as all beings are connected and mutually dependent [Simpson, 2016].

Recognition of this “subjectivity inherent in the natural world”, as Mark E. Koltko-Rivera puts it [2004], is a crucial difference between the Indigenous worldview and the anthropocentrism of the Western worldview, which measures the subjectivity of non-human beings by the human standard. The word ‘non-anthropocentric’, as Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022] point out, fails to capture this difference. As they argue, the best it does, as an antonym, is emphasising the difference of the Indigenous world-sense from

the Western worldview, while using the Western framing as the starting point. However, the term fails to show *how* the Indigenous worldview is different. Various terms have been proposed to describe the relationality of the Indigenous world-sense, such as animism, panentheism, ecocentrism and biocentrism [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. However, as Four Arrows and Narvaez argue, they all fail: “Notwithstanding that all the terms were created and defined by Western or Eastern postcolonial philosophers, religious scholars, and anthropologists, there is something missing” [ibid.: 110]. As they point out, the differences that these terms are failing to capture are the place-based nature of being, human belonging to the land, recognition of a creative force that pervades everything, every existing element, making us all kin, i.e., related. They call this Indigenous spirituality.

The most commonly used term to describe the Indigenous worldview is ‘kincentric’, which was proposed by Dennis Martinez [2008] to show that the Indigenous ways of perceiving and being in the world start from relationality and kin, rather from an individual, thus, opposing it to the Western worldview. This relationality implies that being is always contextual, i.e., takes place through relationships with a concrete place, concrete human and non-human beings. And these relations are not a background that human life develops against, but the very essence of it. As Shawn Wilson [2008: 80] puts it: “Rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of”. Or, as Brian Burkhart [2019: 194] argues, “[b]eing alive is not dependent on any particular property that a thing might have but on having relationality or interconnectedness itself”.

On the contrary, Terry LeBlanc [quoted in Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 107], a Mi’kmaq-Acadian theologian and anthropologist, whose quote is used as an epigraph to this chapter, argues that in Western Christian theology “[t]he emphasis has almost entirely been exclusively on the restoration of the human relation with God first, then with others in the human community.” At the same time, according to LeBlanc, Western Christian theology has failed “miserably to account for the work of the Spirit, dare I say the gifts of the Spirit, so abundantly evident in the rest of creation”. The Indigenous non-anthropocentrism (i.e., kincentrism) is deeply spiritual. As Four Arrows and Narvaez put it [2022: 115], “[a]n awareness of Spirit [...] is key for the Indigenous non-anthropocentrism” (although the term ‘non-anthropocentrism’ does not capture this). Therefore, the Indigenous ecological thinking is in its essence also spiritual. And vice

versa, Indigenous spirituality is in its essence ecological. How this manifests in the Ulchi culture is discussed in Chapter 4, and how this principle is present in Indigenous economic practices is discussed in Chapter 5.

Thus, reflecting on what it means to be human from the perspective of the Indigenous worldview invites us to think not only in terms of the social responsibilities, roles and connections. Community is, of course, an integral part of it [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. However, being human, in this worldview, does not end at being a good community member, it extends much further, accounting for all other relations as well. For example, one saying that is used in prayers and ceremonies by a number of Indigenous communities in North America translates as “All my relations”, emphasising the importance of relationality to the Indigenous ways of being. In their turn, Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 7] talk about being a human as being “a member of the earth community”. As human life is understood through the connections to the land and to all other beings, humans are seen as part of this complex system of life, rather than as outsiders to it, i.e., are not seen in disconnection from the rest of creation. Nature, in its turn, is seen as benevolent, rather than as a plane that presents danger to humans and should be subjugated. Moreover, nature has also been the main teacher for Indigenous communities, who would traditionally follow the natural law as the law of living and would organise social, economic, spiritual and economic practices in line with it. For example, Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 151] suggest that the value of generosity that is intrinsic to Indigenous cultures “mimics the mutualism of the rest of the natural world”. Also, inspired by the cycles of nature and life processes, time in Indigenous cultures has traditionally been perceived as cyclical.

While trying to learn from the Indigenous worldview, it is also important to define the worldview that it is being opposed to. However, this is not an easier task than defining the Indigenous worldview. The term ‘Western’ can be useful as it helps highlight the geopolitical roots and current prevalence of the worldview, i.e., Europe (first of all, Western Europe), North America, Australia and New Zealand. At the same time, the term ‘Western’ unifies and eliminates the variety of opinions that exist within that geographical space. Furthermore, it is not easy to delineate the boundaries of the West, especially today amidst the processes of globalisation and internalisation of Western practices and

culture across the globe. For example, is Eastern Europe, including Russia, considered part of the Western world?¹¹

Another term commonly used to denote the critiqued worldview is 'dominant'. Shawn Wilson [2008: 35] uses this term to describe "the culture of European-descended and Eurocentric, Christian, heterosexist, male-dominated Canada or Australia". While Wilson's use of the term is situated in the context of these two countries, it has also been applied by other authors to a broader geographical context [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. As opposed to 'Western', the term 'dominant' can be useful because it emphasises the dynamic of domination of one worldview over the other, and as Wilson points out, can also highlight its different axes. Thus, in the context of worldviews, the term 'dominant' also points at the problem of cultural racism and the coloniality of knowledge [Fanon, 1967; Quijano, 2000] as the dominant worldview silences other voices, including the Indigenous ones. Naming this dynamic is important, because, as Four Arrows and Narvaez point out, the current dominant worldview is commonly presented as universal, i.e., applicable to all of humanity and all of human history, whereas it actually emerged rather recently, "in the past 1 percent of human history", as they put it [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 4].

Another term for defining the Western worldview has been proposed by Joannie Halas [1998] — 'whitestream'. However, this term is not necessarily applicable in all contexts. For example, in the context of Russia, racial discrimination, including of Indigenous people, can be to a lesser degree predicated on the skin colour. Thus, throughout this text, I use the terms 'Western', 'dominant' and 'dominant Western' to refer to the worldview that underpins capitalism and the exploitation and destruction it is based on.

Another important question is the relationship between the Indigenous worldview and the Western/dominant worldview. These two are commonly placed in opposition to each other as the opposite ways of experiencing the world. Thus, Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022] assert that there exist only two worldviews: one that considers nature as intelligent and humans as intrinsically part of nature, and one that considers it otherwise. They argue that it is impossible to find a third category.¹² On the other hand, John Borrows [2024], an

¹¹ This question has marked a division between two distinct groups of thought in Russia for centuries and still continues to impact the Russian politics today.

¹² Although when discussing the contrasting precepts, they suggest looking at them as "a true dichotomy best viewed as a continuum" rather than a rigid binary [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 4].

Anishinaabe/Ojibway thinker specialising in Indigenous law called for avoiding dichotomic thinking when talking about the Indigenous and Western worldviews, and highlighted the importance of recognising that a diversity of views also exists within the Western tradition. Thus, Borrows called for extending the Indigenous value of respecting all points of view also to the Western tradition, meaning, that a reductionist approach obscuring the diversity of voices should be avoided in the case of the Western worldview just as much as in the case of the Indigenous worldview. Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022] also agree that dualistic thinking of opposing the Indigenous and the Western worldviews contradicts the Indigenous values. However, they also insist that in the present moment making a distinction between the two is critical as “we are at a point where either/or decisions must be made regarding which way of understanding our place in the world will best serve life systems” [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 8].

While I do agree with Four Arrows and Narvaez’s opposition of the two worldviews, including the strategic use of it in the times of ecological and social crises, at the same time I think it can be useful and also more realistic to think about the worldviews as existing on a spectrum, rather than as two confined opposing units. For example, if we use nature’s intelligence as the indicator of one or the other extreme, it can be said that the dominant Western worldview (as, for example, manifested in the extractive and dominating capitalist culture) and degrowth theory are not located on the same end of the spectrum. The framings of nature in two are quite different. However, both originate from the Western context. At the same time, as has been discussed above, degrowth, despite its efforts to decolonise the imaginary, still carries certain biases that are common to the Western worldview, such as anthropocentrism (although to a lesser extent than is the case in the capitalist imaginary), and the degrowth framing of relationality to nature is different from the Indigenous perspective outlined above. Furthermore, a spectrum of opinions can be identified within the degrowth community itself — for example on the worldview spectrum the feminist-decolonial take on degrowth can be placed closer to the Indigenous end of the spectrum than some other takes on degrowth.

While distinguishing the two worldviews is important for understanding what kind of living society would like to move (as far as possible) away from and where we would like to get in terms of our perception of the world, singling out two worldviews as never overlapping categories can make the task of worldview change seem like a daunting, if not impossible, task. On the contrary, seeing the worldviews as a spectrum can be helpful in terms of

indicating the path and at the same time giving hope that this change of our ways of being is possible.

3.3 Land-based being

Brian Burkhart [2019] in the book *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* explores the differences between the Indigenous and Western ontologies and epistemologies. To describe the former, Burkhart proposes the terms *being-from-the-land*, *knowing-from-the-land* and *meaning-from-the-land*. Burkhart's argument is that being, knowing and meaning is always rooted in the locality, even though the Western tradition tries to obscure this locality. In the book, Burkhart does not give hard definitions to these three terms. I suspect, that they are intended to be used loosely to describe different, but always related and often overlapping, elements of land-based being that the Indigenous worldview is rooted in.

When I first came across the notion of being-from-the-land in Burkhart's book, I struggled to comprehend what it refers to. The struggle that I experienced while reading the book was a clear indicator that land as it is understood in the Indigenous worldview is not present in my ontological landscape. This ontological blindness towards the land left me perplexed. This could probably be compared to the absence of the concept of gender in generations of Western thought before it was conceptualised by feminist and queer thinkers. However, in the Indigenous worldview, the land is paramount. Land — and other terms, such as locality or place, implying the same concept — is the central concept in anglophone Indigenous literature that is used to describe the Indigenous ways of being and knowing. Shawn Wilson [2008: 87–88] writes that for Indigenous Peoples, “[t]heir relationship to the land, their experience on that land shapes everything that is around them.” Glen Coulthard [2014] calls this ‘grounded normativity’.

So, what do Indigenous authors mean by the land? As Wilson [2008: 88] puts it, “land is another word for place, environment, your reality, the space you are in.” Thus, the concept of land, from perspective the Indigenous worldview, is broad and, as Simpson [2016: 22] suggests, “includes land and waters, plants and animals, and the spiritual world — a peopled cosmos of influencing powers”. As Enrique Salmón [2000] points out, the land is

central to almost all Indigenous creation stories. This land is, however, not abstract, but the concrete land that the stories claim a relationship to, whether it is the land on which the people live now, or a historical place, or a mythical land. As Vine Deloria Jr. [2003] points out, this connection to the land is not the same or even comparable to patriotism or nationalism. It is about the sense of belonging to planet Earth and connection to it in a concrete place with the concrete beings inhabiting it, but it is not about the allegiance to the state, its institutions and ideas, such as democracy.

This locality of being that Indigenous authors talk about is not abstract or purely conceptual. As Burkhart [2019: xvi] puts it, “[i]t is more than a concept; it is a materiality”. The land is materiality itself, it is alive, it has agency and it has spirit. Therefore, the land is not just a background for human life to develop against. On the contrary, as Burkhart [ibid.: xvii] argues, “[l]ocality is the originary and continual manifestation of being, of knowing, of meaning”. Burkhart [ibid.: xiv] goes on to suggest that: “Locality as a root of being is part of each of us and speaks through us and from our historical and geographical place in the world regardless of how our identity is constructed in relation to culture or nation.” Thus, the relationship with the land as it is understood (and lived) in Indigenous societies is very different from the way the land is perceived and related to in the dominant worldview. This difference is emphasised by the recognition of the fact that, as Burkhart [2019: 90] puts it, that “people do not create territory”, on the contrary “territory creates a people”. Luther Standing Bear, Chief of the Oglala Sioux, wrote in the 1933 book *Land of the Spotted Eagle* [quoted in Merton Babcock, 1973: 5]:

“The American Indian is of the soil, whether it be the region of forests, plains, pueblos, or mesas. He fits into the landscape, for the hand that fashioned the continent also fashioned the man for his surroundings. He once grew as naturally as the wild sunflowers; he belongs just as the buffalo belonged. With a physique that fitted, the man developed fitting skills — crafts which today are called American. And the body had a soul, also formed and moulded by the same master hand of harmony”.

Leanne Simpson [2016] suggests that the Indigenous Peoples’ connection to the land can be defined as ‘consensual attachment’, which shapes all aspects of the lived reality of Indigenous communities. Thus, Simpson [2016: 43] writes: “Indigenous bodies don’t relate to the land by possessing or owning it or having control over it. We relate to land

through connection — generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear relationship”. Thus, this kind of relationality with the land based on the principle of consent has legal implications. It also translates into a particular way of land management, which is generative and less intrusive than the dominant approaches. Instead of altering the landscapes and placing plants and animals in the locations that are convenient for the people, many Indigenous cultures traditionally sought to create the conditions for the plant and animal species to flourish in the places where they were already spread [Johnston, 2022]. A number of Indigenous cultures have stories about agreements they entered into with non-human beings that they shared the land with and the consequences of not respecting those beings by taking more than what the community needed [Simpson, 2016].

The relationship with the land that Indigenous thinkers talk about is created over time and generations, as people need to get to know the place. Thus, being-from-the-land implies knowing the land. Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 15] suggest that living in connection to the land means having a practical knowledge of the place, which includes “a holistic knowledge about plant medicine, star knowledge, waterways, and lessons about how to live from local creatures of every kind”. However, land-based being means much more than this kind of practical knowledge. For example, Leanne Simpson [2016] talks about land as pedagogy. John Borrows [2017: 10] describes it this way: “People regulate their behaviour and resolve their disputes by drawing guidance from what they see in the behaviour of the sun, moon, stars, winds, waves, trees, birds, animals, and other natural phenomena. [...] As we draw analogies from our surroundings, and appropriately apply or distinguish what we see, we learn about how to love, and how we should live in our lands”.

For many Indigenous cultures, this relationship to the land also suggests connections to it through ancestors: “[l]andscape is sacred [...] because it holds the spiritual energy of ancestors” [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 15]. However, the land is also considered sacred simply “because it lives” [ibid.], i.e., regardless of the connection to the human experience thereof. Therefore, the meaning of the land to Indigenous Peoples is not utilitarian. It is about the sustenance and shaping of human life, but also about the connection to the spirits of ancestors who became part of that land as well as spirits of other beings, and more broadly to a place that is a small-scale representation of the living Earth. And as such, land is considered sacred in its own right.

This relationship with the land is to be maintained, renewed and revered continually [Deloria Jr., 2003], even when it cannot sustain the people anymore as a result of ecological degradation caused by colonialism and capitalism [Jobin, 2023]. Ceremony plays an important role in sustaining this relationship, however, maintaining this relationship on a daily basis is as important [Wilson, 2008]. As Wilson [2008: 89-90] puts it: “There is a lot of work, dedication and time spent in building up the relationships with the cosmos that allow the visible ceremony to happen”. Therefore, this link between the people and the land takes place not only through grand manifestations of spirituality, such as ceremonies, but also through “the seemingly mundane relationships that we hold with our everyday world” [ibid.]. Examples of these practices from the Ulchi culture are described in Chapter 4.

Summing up this way of relating to the land, Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 16] suggest that “[a]n Aboriginal equivalent of Descartes’s ‘I think therefore I am’ might be ‘I am emplaced, therefore I am’”. This kind of thinking about land, thus, implies a very ecological perception of human life as well, as will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

3.4 Indigenous critique of the Western worldview

In the past few years there has been an upsurge in texts written by Indigenous authors, at least in the English language. These authors have been reclaiming the space for Indigenous voices that were silenced for decades or even centuries, and have been writing about Indigeneity and Indigenous cultures on their own terms rather than having their cultures reinterpreted by external, mainly Western, thinkers. This section provides a summary of some points of critique raised by Indigenous thinkers in relation to the Western ways of being in and perceiving the world.

Anthropocentrism

The kincentric worldview, as Brian Burkhart [2019: 204] puts it, is based on “truly non-anthropocentric ethics” as it is shaped by the interconnections that bond all beings on Earth and does not assume that humans are exceptional or superior. On the contrary, the dependence of human life on other beings is highlighted. Thus, Vine Deloria Jr. [2003:

87] writes: “Recognition that the human beings hold an important place in such a creation is tempered by the thought that they are dependent on everything in creation for their existence.” On the contrary, the Western worldview rooted in the Christian idea of human superiority is commonly described by Indigenous authors as anthropocentric. While anglophone Indigenous authors often point out the role of Christianity in shaping the anthropocentric worldview, anthropocentric values had been expressed prior to Christianity as well.¹³ Nonetheless, it is specifically Christianity that assigned the idea of human superiority a major role in its cosmology [Deloria Jr., 2003].

Thus, Indigenous authors critique the Western anthropocentrism that denies human dependence on other beings and that presumes that the natural law can be circumvented through technology and progress, thus, pointing out the Western hubris that ignores the natural law. Winona LaDuke [1999] wrote: “That is our biggest teaching, that natural law is the highest law, and it would be folly to figure that you can outwit natural law... You can change the terms, you can change the allowable limits, you can do the risk assessment — all these things — but in the end, the fact is that you and I drink that water. You and I breathe that air. You and I live here.” Or, as Darcia Narvaez [in Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 185] points out, “[t]hose taught in the dominant worldview are not taught to focus on the laws of nature, [and i]t’s not just scientists who have this moral blindness, but humanitarians too”.

Similarly, the kincentric perspective also offers a lens for the critique of Western environmentalism, which, as Burkhart [2019] argues, is stuck in value-based ethical choices. Burkhart suggests that the Western environmental ethics are torn between the binary choice of intrinsic or instrumental value, which is in both cases done through human valuation. From the perspective of the Indigenous worldview, the issue of value does not exist as “in a world where everything is sacred, there are no intrinsic or instrumental values” [ibid.: 203]. Moreover, as Burkhart points out, under the binary system of instrumental versus intrinsic, when intrinsic value is assigned to something (in the case of Western environmentalism, to nature), simultaneously a need of assigning instrumental value to something else emerges, otherwise risking to destroy the meaning of intrinsic value, as these two types of valuation can only exist in opposition. Eventually, within Western environmentalism that assigns intrinsic value to nature, as Burkhart

¹³ For example, the following statement by Socrates: “You must forgive me, dear friend; I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town do” [quoted in Young, 2014: 184].

observes, this can lead to misanthropy that devalues human life [Burkhart, 2019]. Hence, a choice of attributing intrinsic or instrumental value to nature, from the kincentric perspective, is not a real choice at all. It is a “forked dead end” [Burkhart, 2019: 179], “because the centring of the importance of human beings is already embedded in the notion of value itself” [ibid.: 178]. Both intrinsic and instrumental value fail to account for the “moral obligation towards nonhumans” that traditional Indigenous cultures are based on [ibid.: 200]. It is a mistake, therefore, to assume that the Indigenous environmentalism and non-anthropocentrism are based on the idea of the intrinsic value of non-humans. A truly non-anthropocentric ethic, as Burkhart argues, should be outside of the issue of value, and come from the understanding of connectedness that begins with the recognition of universal sacredness.

The problematic relationship of the Western worldview towards nature also underpins the romanticised perception of Indigenous peoples “as pristine creatures living in nature like animals in a Garden of Eden” [Burkhart, 2019: 182]. The image of “the noble ecological Indian” [ibid.: 183] is rooted in the assumption that civilised humans, i.e., primarily Westerners, are not part of nature, whether it is seen in the positive or negative light. All in all, Western environmental thought generally fails to engage with the Indigenous environmentalism on its own terms.

Universalism

Many Indigenous thinkers [e.g., Deloria Jr., 2003; Burkhart, 2019] have pointed out that Western cultures have the tendency to universalise their experiences and truths, i.e., to extrapolate their experiences to all of humanity, although they are in essence unique and context-bound like any other experience. For example, Aileen Moreton-Robinson [2011] discusses how the universalisation of whiteness, which implies the equation of whiteness with humanity, underpins the race-based systems of power. This universalising tendency has its roots in the particularities of the Western philosophical tradition that, since the Greek classics, has sought to discover the ultimate metaphysical truths and has been driven by the pursuit of the highest level of universality and, as a consequence, abstraction [Gaukroger, 2020]. This philosophical tradition was continued by Christianity and in later periods of Western philosophy. For example, the Western religious tradition, as Vine Deloria Jr. [2003] outlines in the book *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, has

interpreted revelation as the communication of a divine plan and information about the ultimate nature of the world, which is applicable to all peoples in different places and at different times, as opposed to being seen as a contextual spiritual experience. As a result, other, non-Western religious traditions have often also been judged from this point of view, i.e., based on their ability to explain existence and the cosmos in universal terms. This underpinned the reduction of the beliefs of Indigenous Peoples by European settlers and missionaries to superstition, which was used to justify their Christianisation. The same universalising approach is also applied in the context of scientific knowledge, when Indigenous knowledges (the term 'Indigenous science' has also been used in this context), for example, ecological knowledge, has been devalued or ignored as not scientifically sound [Snively & Corsiglia, 2000; Nelson & Shilling, 2018; Kolopenuk, 2020]. The problem with the universalising approach of Western thought is that it has been judging other knowledge systems by its own epistemological standard, as well as based on their ability to explain all of existence, whereas Indigenous knowledges tend to be contextual and do not seek to provide universal explanations.

However, as Indigenous thinkers emphasise, these experiences and revelations that Christian theologians and Western philosophers and scientists insist on as universal are actually as contextual as Indigenous beliefs. No knowledge can be interpreted as an absolute truth that would be valid for all times and all places [Deloria Jr., 2003]. Thus, when Western knowledge is transplanted to a different place, for example, through colonisation it is taken out of its context, its locality, or, floats free from the land, as Burkhart [2019] puts it. However, as Burkhart [ibid.] argues, the culture, even when removed from its original locality and transplanted elsewhere, remains specific to its context, in the case of colonisation of the Americas, to Europe. Furthermore, Burkhart [ibid.] points out that those 'universal' Western truths are specific to white, male subjectivity. And I would add that they are specific to Western Europe, rather than all of Europe. Therefore, the claimed universalism of Western experiences is only seeming. Or as Burkhart [ibid.: 115-116] puts it: "The false absolute of Western knowledge is the Eurocentric bubble that creates a mirror of itself across all localities with the false impression of universality".

Due to this focus on the search for universal laws and principles, Western philosophy deals with "an imitation earth or human being", as Burkhart [2019: xxviii] puts it. Thus, by eliminating the context from its considerations, the Western philosophical tradition places

itself in a position where it has to deal with an abstract reality that does not exist. As Burkhart [ibid.: xxxi] suggests, this abstract and universal kind of thinking creates “webs of confusion and illusion, classic trickster circles that turn in on themselves, but also to a disruption of earth morality”. Eventually, this also “results in what appears to be intractable ethical and environmental problems” [ibid.]. In relation to the topic of this thesis, in Western philosophy, this universalising way of thinking also translates into a search for universal recipes of meaningfulness.

This universalisation of Western/European experiences as the absolute truth has practical and political implications. It drives colonialism, which seeks “to erase the actual locality through delocality” [Burkhart, 2019: xvii]. This means that the values and beliefs specific to the European context have been used as a tool and justification of colonisation and erasure of local cultures, seeking to replace them with the European ‘truth’ [Moreton-Robinson, 2011]. Thus, the local cultures of the Indigenous Peoples (Burkhart writes specifically about the context of the Americas) have been sought to be replaced with a delocalised culture, i.e., a culture that was taken out of its context. However, as Burkhart suggests [ibid.: xvii]: “Indigenous locality can never actually be removed; it can only be obscured”.

Time versus place

Another big difference between the Indigenous and the Western worldview is the relationship with the place and time. As opposed to the Indigenous cultures that are land-based (as was mentioned above and will be further discussed in the next section), Western cultures are centred around the idea of time, specifically of linear time, i.e., history. Vine Deloria Jr. [2003] suggested that, when driven first of all by the consideration of time, traditions are drawn towards experiential and abstract interpretations, rather than the reality of the experiences themselves. On the contrary, Indigenous cultures across the world traditionally paid less attention to time and the chronological order of past events. As Deloria [2003: 97] argues, there is a different way of recording time and events: “the story itself is important, not its precise chronological location”. The perception of time (and perception in general) in the Indigenous traditions is not linear, as is demonstrated by the non-linearity of many original (i.e., unedited) Indigenous stories. Thus, Terry Tafoya [1995: 12] wrote: “Stories go in circles. They don’t go in straight lines. It helps if

you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and hard as finding your way home.” An interesting experiment demonstrating this difference between linear and circular thinking was carried out by psychologist Frederic C. Bartlett [quoted in Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022] who studied how conceptual structures shape human memory. He asked Edwardian English participants to read and retell the Indigenous story *War of the Ghosts*, and found that they would omit the elements that did not fit into their linear way of thinking, and, trying to make the story mirror their own culture, eventually made it more linear.

The time-based and land-based traditions also rely on different perceptions of human life. Deloria Jr. [ibid.: 153] writes: “The Near Eastern religions¹⁴ seek and guarantee *salvation*, which is conceived as an escape from this planet to a place where loyal followers can enjoy eternal life filled with the delights that they were denied during this lifetime. Indians see themselves returning to nature, their bodies becoming the dust of Mother Earth, and their souls journeying to another place across the Milky Way or sometimes being reborn in a new generation of the tribe”. The understandings of what happens to a soul after one’s death varies across Indigenous cultures, however, the general narrative differs from the linear (and true-world, as was discussed in Chapter 1) narratives that are central to the perception of time and history in Christianity. The importance attributed to the afterlife in the Christian tradition also implies that a lesser importance is attributed to the life in the present world [Deloria Jr., 2003]. On the contrary, in Indigenous traditions, the focus is placed on the “present community realities and not a reliance on part of future golden ages toward which the community is moving or from which the community has veered” [ibid.: 67]. Deloria Jr. [ibid.] also suggests that the problem of meaninglessness of our times originates from this loss of connection with the land and the teleological thinking with the resulting overfocus on time, history and progress.

Indigenous thinkers critique this Western teleology as anthropocentric as teleological thinking ascribes primary ontological importance to time rather than place and, thus, places human experience above nature. Deloria Jr. [2003: 68] pointed out the underlying “pretence [of teleological thinking] that the earth simply does not matter, that human affairs alone are important”. Furthermore, this Western focus on a linear history and its rootedness in Christianity also has political consequences. Thus, Deloria Jr. [2003: 111]

¹⁴ The ancient Egyptian religion, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

writes: “Where did Westerners get their ideas of divine right to conquest, of manifest destiny, of themselves as the vanguard of true civilisation, if not from Christianity? [It] tied itself to history and maintained that its god controlled that history”. Thus, as Burkhart [2019] suggests, (European) time and history become agents of coloniality. And the Western time-based tradition continues to have major political implications also today, now through the concept of progress [Deloria Jr., 2003]. As a strategy of resistance to the modernity/coloniality project, Burkhart [2019: 50] proposes ‘epistemic locality’, i.e., thinking that starts from the land/place. It should be pointed out that Deloria Jr. [2003] recognised that ecology and left politics make efforts to challenge the hegemony of time and “recapture a sense of place”. This, for example, can also be seen in the case of degrowth thought that challenges the teleological narrative of development.

Critique of capitalism

In Indigenous literature, the discussed above critique of the Western anthropocentrism and of the teleological logic of progress has also been connected to economic critique, including the critique of capitalism and its growth orientation [Coulthard, 2014]. Often, the issues of colonialism, capitalism, racism and heteropatriarchy are brought up together as interconnected [Simpson, 2016]. However, it should be pointed out that by far not every Indigenous thinker or leader has opposed capitalist development, and many have, on the contrary, embraced it as a tool of ensuring the preservation of their nations or for other reasons [Jobin, 2023]. It should also be noted that different Indigenous communities have been affected by development differently. Some receive economic and other benefits, for example, from resource extraction or due to proximity to urban centres (for example, the casino business in Canada [Manitowabi, 2021]), whereas others have found themselves at the frontier of capitalist extractivism without benefiting from it at all, but only being left to deal with the dreadful consequences of ecological destruction [Huseman & Short, 2012].

Rebecca Adamson [2008: 33] argues that “[m]ore than any single issue, economic development is the battle line between two competing worldviews”. Thus, although today Indigenous communities are adapting to the capitalist reality in different ways, traditional Indigenous economic thought and practice drastically differed from the logic of capitalism. Leanne Simpson [2016: 8–9] writes: “Our nationhood is based on the idea that the earth

gives and sustains all life, that 'natural resources' are not 'natural resources' at all, but gifts from Aki, the land. Our nationhood is based on the foundational concept that we should give up what we can to support the integrity of our homelands for the coming generations. We should give more than we take". Thus, traditional Indigenous economies were (and in many cases continue to be) based on such ideas as connection to the land and self-limitation. Conversely, the ideas of economic growth and accumulation for their own sake and in disregard of the natural laws do not seem to sit well with this kind of economic thinking [Coulthard, 2014].

Pointing at the incommensurability of the Indigenous worldview and capitalism, Simpson [2016: 67] argues that "[c]apitalism cannot create Indigenous worlds, because, as Vijay Prashad says, 'capitalism has never been able to produce decency'". Instead, it produces scarcity and makes people forget about the natural abundance of the world [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022], as well as obscures our connection to the land. From the kincentric point of view, economy is not an abstract domain that exists independently of everything else. On the contrary, economy is a way of relating to the land, which is concrete and material. Moreover, the economic dimension of an Indigenous community's life was not seen in disconnection from other aspects of life. Shalene Jobin [2023], writing about Indigenous economics from the perspective of the Cree Nation, points out that the relationship with the land develops on the spiritual, physical and economic levels, with all these realms being interconnected and aimed at sustaining the community's life. Jobin calls this the Indigenous political economy, which aims to uphold all aspects of life, as opposed to Western economic thought, in which the economic sphere can subsume all other aspects of life [Jobin, 2023]. Importantly, as Jobin argues, economic activities are constitutive, meaning that they shape communities' relationship with the land as well as relationships among community members, impacting their values and practices. Thus, Jobin [2023: 19–20] writes: "How we relate to the land has an impact on who we are and the types of responsibilities we claim. In contrast, a neoliberal model can falsely assert that fundamentally altering our relationship to the land will not significantly alter who we are".

Indigenous communities, as many Indigenous authors point out, embody examples of alternatives to capitalism. Thus, Working with Nishnaabeg Elders, Simpson [2016] observed how in their everyday life they embodied an alternative to capitalism and colonialism, showing that they do not accept the inevitability of either. Simpson [2016: 17]

writes: “In their very quiet, non-demonstrative, and profoundly gentle way, those Elders refused settler colonialism, driving along the TransCanada in a children’s school bus, laughing all the way to their trapline. They refused and generated something different. Everyday. Just like their Ancestors and their Ancestor’s Ancestors.” Many Indigenous communities today continue to follow their traditional economic practices, including gift and barter, even if often on a smaller scale. They continue to maintain their relationship with the land, even if, as Jobin points out, “because of human impact, [it] is no longer able to provide for all the people’s subsistence needs” [2016: 26], or because capitalism made the Indigenous communities move away “from living with the land to making a living off the land” [ibid.: 25].

3.5 Meaning-from-the-land

This kind of thinking about land implies a particular understanding of human life — through our connectedness to and dependence on Earth and all its beings. It, therefore, suggests a deeply ecological perception of human life. Darcia Narvaez [in Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 130] writes: “Remembering that I am always in a web of ‘all our relations’, grand and small, lifts my spirit, pulls me out of my self-concerns, for I am never alone. I am a wave on an ocean of life. How can you be lonely nestled in the arms of Mother Earth?” This also applies to the question of meaningfulness — how can one feel meaningless in a world full of meanings originating from such relationality?

While Burkhart [2019] writes about being-from-the-land, knowing-from-the-land and meaning-from-the-land, the last concept is not particularly explained in the text. Based on its use in the book, ‘meaning-from-the-land’ appears to have a broader meaning, describing meaning-creation in a broad sense, not only in relation to the meaning of human life. For example, Burkhart [2019, xvi] writes: “Locality is the way the human voice as the conveyer of human meaning arises from the voice of the land (knowing-from-the-land or meaning-from-the-land) — as in the manner of the Diné landscape whereby the wind gives rise to breath and makes the human voice quite literally an extension of the voice of the land.” Thus, meaning-from-the-land implies that meaning is always context-bound and never universal. This way of thinking about meaning suggests that the search for a universal meaning of life seems like a very Western philosophical exercise, which erases the locality of being as well as land and our connections to it as a source of

meaning, seeking instead generic meanings, which could explain all of human life, but eventually turn out void of meaning. On the contrary, “meaning in locality is originary, is continually shaped by being-in-the-land and being-from-the-land” [Burkhart, 2019: xxii]. Thus, the kincentric way of being suggests that delocalised meanings cannot exist. Every meaning has a context, and all narratives about the meaning of and in life also have their contexts. Although the concept of the meaning-from-the-land is not very detailed in Burkhart’s text, it, nonetheless, offers an important point for reflection — in the Western tradition the land is not part of the perception of human life and of its meaning. The Indigenous worldview, thus, can provide tools for rethinking what it means to be human and live a good life, including the ecological and economic dimensions thereof, as will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

3.6 Learning from Indigenous Peoples

Why do non-Indigenous people need to learn from the Indigenous ways of being and knowing? As Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 7] put it, “the original Indigenous understanding of the world offers the most crucial way to rebalance life systems”. The Indigenous worldview can teach us how to relate to the world, each other and ourselves in ways that could inform more ecological and more harmonious societies. The Western worldview that has underpinned ecological destruction and exploitation of humans and non-humans across the world needs to be scrutinised and challenged. I suggest that a combination of Indigenous critique and degrowth critique could offer a useful critical framing for this. On the one hand, feminist-decolonial degrowth can offer systemic critique of the institutions and power dynamics and their interconnections with the economic and cultural processes. On the other hand, the Indigenous worldview offers ontological critique that can teach us the importance of living through relationality and, using Four Arrows and Narvaez’s words [2022], “how to live the fullness of appreciating the wonder of the gift of life on Mother Earth”. Thus, bringing the Indigenous and degrowth perspectives together can help define a truly radical approach to systemic transition.

Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 7] talk about the need to decolonise and Indigenise the mind. As they point out, there is disagreement among Indigenous thinkers on whether non-Indigenous people can interact, and particularly teach, the Indigenous worldview. While some call this cultural appropriation, others, as has been discussed above, claim

that the Indigenous worldview is the original worldview [Yunkaporta, 2020], and that as many people as possible need to learn about it if we want to find ways to address the climate crisis. Also, for those coming from a non-Indigenous context, this can be not an easy task (as, for example, my struggle with grasping the Indigenous conceptualisation of the land demonstrates). Therefore, when engaging with the Indigenous worldview, it is important to take into account a number of factors, in order to ensure that this work is carried out ethically and in culturally appropriate ways (as judged from the perspective of the Indigenous cultures).

One of the first concerns that is commonly raised when working with Indigenous knowledges is the issue of authenticity. Questioning and doubting the authenticity of Indigenous voices is a classic approach in Western anthropology, which has historically and still quite often today “treats cultures as artifacts”, as Burkhart puts it [2019: xix]. For generations, Western researchers sought to test Indigenous voices against an image of Indigenous cultures that had been created by Western thinkers themselves. As Andrea Smith [2014], points out, no one questions if Michel Foucault’s thought authentically reflects the French culture or whether Foucault himself was authentically French. Conversely, Indigenous thinkers — as well as members of communities in anthropological studies — are constantly questioned for their authenticity. Thus, the weight of the Indigenous voices is commonly judged based on the grounds of ethnographic value, i.e., the value for Western science, rather than for value and truth in a broader sense [Burkhart, 2019]. Thus, from the Western perspective, Indigenous and Western voices typically are not seen as equal. As Burkhart [2019: 77] puts it, “Native voices are viewed as mere containers of truth, while Western voices have agency and self-determination”.

Challenging this devaluing approach towards Indigenous thought, Smith [2014: 210] argues that Indigenous voices “can only be read for their truth”. Using Simpson’s [2016: 42] words, this also implies recognising that the Indigenous “intelligence is ongoing”, and does not remain statically fixed in some past form. Thus, Simpson argues against the traditionalisation of Indigenous knowledge, i.e., judging its value or truthfulness based on how close it is to the traditional, ‘authentic’ version. Burkhart [2019] takes this argument further refusing space to the question of the authenticity of Indigenous voices at all. In this thesis, I follow Burkhart’s take on the issue. Raising the question of authenticity usually comes from the place of seeking to claim authority over Indigenous voices as

judging one's authenticity can only be done from a position of superiority. Furthermore, from the point of view of the reflection presented here, the question of authenticity has little, if any, relevance. Having an example of societies that function based on principles and in ways that are completely different from the dominant society has a lot of value in itself as it shows how our societies and ways of being can be different.

The process of learning from Indigenous cultures should also avoid other unethical practices that abound in research that was carried *on* (and not *with*) Indigenous communities, such as extractive research that benefits only the researcher and their institution, but not the community [Wilson, 2008]. In the realm of research this implies applying decolonial and Indigenous methodologies [Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2021], as will be discussed in Chapter 4. Moreover, as Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022] point out, learning from Indigenous Peoples should also imply supporting them in their struggles against oppression, displacement and extractivism, as many of them continue to live through discrimination and oppression and “remain on the front lines in defending what biodiversity remains on Mother Earth” [ibid.: 11] as well as in preserving the traditional knowledges.

Also, it is important to be aware of and question the distorted representations of Indigenous Peoples and cultures that have been produced and reproduced by Western research and culture, as has already been mentioned in this chapter. One of such distortions is the romanticisation of Indigenous Peoples and of the Indigenous worldview. Shawn Wilson [2008] suggests that the era of traditionalisation in anthropological research, which sought to ‘traditionalise’ Indigenous peoples and preserve the cultures in that ‘traditional’ form, produced the concept of the ‘noble savage’. Later on, the image of a ‘noble Indian’ was romanticised by the hippie movement in the 1970s and later by the New Age movement. As Deloria Jr. [2003] points out, the overwhelming majority of literature about Indigenous Peoples (Deloria Jr. refers to the North American context specifically, but it can also be applied to other contexts) deals with “a fantasy image” and various conceptions of what Indigenous people are or should be that were crafted by the Western culture.

In the anglophone world, particularly in North America, such texts as *Seven Arrows* by Hyemeyohsts Storm published in 1972, as Deloria Jr. [2003] points out, had a great impact on the non-Indigenous readers and “brought the subject of tribal religions into the

marketplace of ideas for the increasing number of people looking for a personal religion and new kinds of religious experience.” Thus, Indigenous traditions have been sought after for a spiritual input and revelation, for some sort of answer, by many generations of non-Indigenous people. And this has had major consequences for Indigenous communities. As Deloria Jr. [ibid.: 41] argues, “[t]ribal religions have been trivialised beyond redemption by people sincerely wishing to learn about them”. Deloria Jr. [ibid.: 38] also writes: “The first wave of appropriation, therefore, was simply the symbolic costumes that non-Indians believed would place them closer to nature.” On the other hand, it is also important to reflect on the question why so many Westerners are drawn to the image of the ‘noble savage’. As Deloria Jr. [ibid.] suggests, this comes from the place of their own shattered identities, especially of those who rejected Christianity but sought some religious experience that would give new meaningful narratives to their lives. However, at the same time, the teachings that have been shared by Indigenous knowledge keepers more often than not have not been taken seriously. As Deloria Jr. [ibid.: 41] writes: “Many people, Indian and non-Indian, have taken a few principles to heart, mostly those beliefs that require little in the way of changing one’s lifestyle”. As Leanne Simpson [2016: 29] puts it, “[o]ne has to be the intervention, one has to not only wear the theories but use them to navigate life”. Therefore, when engaging with an Indigenous culture and the Indigenous worldview, for non-Indigenous learners, it is crucial to do internal check-ins for own intentionality and positionality and also to reflect on how the shared knowledge can be treated respectfully and applied.

Furthermore, the constructed reductionist images of Indigenous traditions and Indigenous Peoples, if turned towards by environmental or social justice movements for inspiration of what a better socioeconomic, political or cultural system could look like, could also lead to utopian hopes that are not grounded in the lived reality of those cultures. And when faced with the ‘more problematic’ aspects of Indigenous history (such as ecological destruction, wars, slavery, etc.) that existed in Indigenous communities just as they have in other communities, such movements risk dismissing the Indigenous experiences altogether on the grounds of their not being ‘perfect’ and not matching the created idealised image. Therefore, when seeking to learn from Indigenous knowledge systems, it is important to consider what kind of answers we are looking for, what narratives about the human condition are applied to Indigenous traditions and whether any of these are reductionist.

Indigenous methodology [Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2021] calls to carry out work with Indigenous communities on their own terms, rather than on the terms of the researchers or people who are trying to learn from them. Burkhart [2019: 180] points out that “Indigenous people are seen as transparent to the Western mind”. However, on the contrary, Western researchers have often misinterpreted Indigenous concepts and theories and/or have failed to integrate them into Western knowledge systems correctly, if at all. One curious example is Maslow’s interaction with the Blackfoot Nation in Alberta, Canada, in 1938 [Lincoln Michel, 2014; Ravilochan, 2021a; Ravilochan, 2021b]. During his stay with the community, Maslow observed striking differences between the ways the Blackfoot society and the dominant society functioned. One of those differences was the fact that, from the Blackfoot point of view, self-actualisation and realisation of one’s gifts and responsibilities was seen as the foundation of the community’s life, rather than the pinnacle of individual life. Commentators disagree on whether Maslow appropriated and misinterpreted the Blackfoot knowledge (‘turned the tipi upside down’), however, as his theory shows, he failed to integrate it into his work.

When learning from Indigenous knowledge systems, it is also important to take into consideration the way knowledge, practice and theory are conceptualised and lived in Indigenous traditions, as well as the traditional Indigenous approaches to pedagogy. For example, when Leanne Simpson started working with Nishnaabeg Elders, she felt that they were not answering her questions, that she could only see their practice, but not their theory. Simpson writes [2016: 18]: “I would ask them about governance, and they would talk about trapping. I would ask them about treaties, and they would take me fishing. I’d ask them what we should do about the mess of colonialism, and they would tell me stories about how well they used to live on the land”. As Simpson puts it, it took her decades to start seeing the theory behind the practices. Thus, in many cases it would be wrong to approach Indigenous cultures with an expectation of clearly framed concepts and theories. As Simpson [2016] describes it, Indigenous cultures are rich in theory, however, usually, it is not presented in the same easily accessible, clearly framed form as in the Western tradition. Often, theories are hidden in stories and revealed through practice [ibid.].

Furthermore, when engaging with Indigenous knowledges, it is important to be aware of our role in creating meanings and contributing to the archive of memory about those cultures. Becky Ropers-Huilman [1999] writing about research as witnessing, calls for

recognising that our research actions change others, in this case, Indigenous communities. However, the impact of two worldviews interacting is inevitably mutual. Therefore, what does bringing Indigenous knowledges to the focus of socioecological debates mean for the future of our collective living on the planet, and how approaches, values and strategies might change in the process? For example, Manitonquat [quoted in Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 10] invites thinking about the Indigenous teachings not as ideas, but as reality, since they constitute “Natural Law, The Way Things Are — the operational manual for a working Creation”. However, while Indigenous teachings can show the way to rebuild a harmonious relationship with the world that we are part of, it is also important to think about how these can be applied in the current reality. Thus, Denise Marsden [quoted in Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 10] suggests that “the aim is not to return to the details of Native ways, but to apply Indigenous values appropriately for our time and with an eye to the future”. Or, as Burkhart [2019: 51] puts it: “Indigenising through epistemic locality does not seek to go back to some constructed Indigenous past any more than it tries to place itself in the ‘present’ of modernity”, suggesting that neither going back into the past, nor embracing the Western way of being would be the right option.

Finally, why does degrowth need to learn from the Indigenous worldview? In the book *Research as Ceremony* [2008: 80], Wilson shares a quote from a friend reflecting on what it means to be Indigenous: “It’s collective, it’s group, it’s community. And I think that’s the basis for relationality. That is, it’s built upon the interconnections, the interrelationships, and that binds the group...”. These words can also be used to describe the degrowth values of a collective and convivial understanding of a good life and a well-functioning society. The quote continues with the following words: “but it’s more than human relationships. And maybe the basis of that relationship among Indigenous people is the land. It’s our relationship to the land. There’s a spiritual connection to the land. So it’s all of those things.” Now, this part is more difficult to relate to from the perspective of degrowth. The latter part of the quote indicates a completely different aspect of relationality — of relating to the entire world of beings (not only human beings). This idea is not particularly present in degrowth thought (as was also confirmed by the findings of the survey discussed in Chapter 2) and most kinds of Western environmentalism, in general. In the kincentric worldview as it is described by Indigenous authors, relationships with people and with the non-human world are equally important, “[b]oth are equally

sacred”¹⁵ [Wilson, 2008: 87]. Conversely, in degrowth literature way less attention is paid to nourishing and maintaining relationships with the non-human world and the land, and the spiritual aspects of that relationship.

As was discussed above, this suggests an important ontological difference between the Indigenous worldview and the Western worldview, which degrowth also carries. Thus, if degrowth, and Western environmentalism in general, wants to offer a radical alternative to capitalism and the worldview that begets it, it is important to take this ontological difference seriously and consider learning from it. Besides problematising the Western anthropocentrism, engaging with Indigenous knowledges also inevitably raises the question of spirituality, which can be not an easy term to use in the academic context. From the point of view of the Indigenous worldview, spirituality “is an integral, infused part of the whole”, as Wilson points out [2008: 89]. When trying to understand Indigenous spirituality, it can be helpful to think about it in the terms defined by Shawn Wilson [2008], who suggests that “spirituality is one’s internal sense of connection to the universe”. Therefore, spirituality in this sense implies relationality and accountability, it means recognising the complex network of relationships that we all are intertwined in and through which we exist. This kind of spirituality is deeply ecological and it might be key to dismantling the anthropocentrism that capitalism is based on. Using Brian Burkhart’s words [2019: xxv], the kincentric worldview can help us with “regrounding our language, being, knowing, meaning, and so on back in the land”.

I would like to wrap up this section with a long quote by Darcia Narvaez from *Restoring the Kinship Worldview* [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022: 76–77] as it encapsulates why and how we can learn from the Indigenous worldview:

“As philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch described, one’s metaphysics (worldview) guides one’s morals. Worldview guides awareness, which is value laden. Worldview draws our attention to some things and not others, shapes action possibilities (affordances), helps us evaluate what is good and not good. The Indigenous worldview we are discussing in this book is

¹⁵ Though I believe that any definition of the term ‘sacred’ will be reductive, to give a glimpse into the concept of sacredness from the point of view of the kincentric worldview, the following definition by Kealiikanakaolehailani and Giardina [2016] can be used: “By sacred, we refer to those sentiments, actions, and commitments that emerge from spirit-based relationships that are founded on love, respect, care, intimate familiarity, and reciprocal exchange”.

one of open possibility and ongoing self-transformation. Thus, when our conceptual structures or schemas about what it means to be a human being are challenged, we can regroup, regrow, expand. Murdoch writes: 'But our freedom is not just freedom to choose and act differently, it is also a freedom to think and believe differently, to see the world differently, to see different configurations and describe them in different words. Moral differences can be differences of concept as well as differences of choice.'

We can make the choice to let go of old ideas, misinformed ideas, exclusionary ideas, and open and expand our heart-sense."

Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to give an overview of the Indigenous worldview and reflect on why and how Western environmental movements, and particularly degrowth, can learn from it. The land-based way of thinking and being that lies at the root of the Indigenous worldview offers a different ontological lens for looking at capitalism. This land-informed perspective can help both diagnose the problem better and also find ways out of the ongoing ecological and social crises (including the crisis of meaning) on grounds that would actually be aligned with natural laws, as opposed to some of the false solutions offered by Western environmentalisms. As was mentioned above, Vine Deloria Jr. believed that ecology and left politics were important efforts in recapturing the sense of place. I suggest that, from the perspective of degrowth, it is important to explore this further and reflect on how degrowth theory delineates the relationship to the land, as well as to look at the gaps in the degrowth vision that the Indigenous worldview helps identify, including the understanding of the place of the human in the world.

CHAPTER 4. The Ulchi and the meaning of life

*Прости, Амур, такое сейчас время.
Мы тоже знаем – так нельзя,
Работы нет в наших деревнях,
А ты кормилец для нас всегда!*¹⁶

V.S. Valdyu

This chapter explores the topic of meaningfulness in the Ulchi culture. For this purpose, I first explain the methodological approach that I followed while working with the Ulchi community (section 4.1) and the applied methods (section 4.2). Then I describe my relationship with members of the Ulchi community and how it developed (section 4.3). The chapter then continues with a description of the history of the Ulchi Nation (section 4.4.), of the Ulchi worldview (section 4.5) and of the conceptual framings related to meaningfulness and a good life that exist in the culture (section 4.6).

4.1 Methodology

As was discussed in the previous chapter, undertaking research that aims to learn about and from Indigenous communities is associated with a range of ethical and practical challenges. In this research project, in addition to engaging with literature written by Indigenous authors, I have worked with the Ulchi, an Indigenous community, whose traditional land is located in the Far East of Russia. The research with the community constitutes the main empirical part of this PhD project, and while planning, conducting and presenting this research I have tried to follow the principles of the Indigenous research paradigm, as it had been outlined by Indigenous scholars, particularly Shawn Wilson [2008] and Margaret Kovach [2021].

¹⁶ This is an excerpt from the poem *Прости, Амур* (*Forgive us, Amur*) written by Valentina Serafimovna Valdyu [Valdyu, 2023]. The literal translation from Russian would be:

Forgive us, Amur, the time is like this.
We also know – this is not allowed,
There is no work in our villages,
And you are always our provider!

The decision to follow the Indigenous research principles in this project has a two-fold motivation. First, Western approaches to studying Indigenous cultures has historically (and in some instances this is the case also today) had an extremely negative impact on Indigenous communities around the world. In addition to being extractive, a lot of such research has contributed to the discrimination and oppression of Indigenous Peoples, as has been accounted for by a number of Indigenous authors [Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Wilson, 2008]. Continuing working in unethical, top-down ways that cause damage instead of benefiting the communities contradicts the purpose of research as an activity that should seek to have a positive impact. Following a methodological approach informed by Indigenous values, therefore, is more appropriate and ethical when carrying out research with an Indigenous community.

Second, not implementing Indigenous methodology in this project would run against its very objective of learning about the Indigenous worldview. A lot of Western research about Indigenous communities has been conducted from the position of cultural superiority, thus, has failed to see and recognise the richness of the knowledges of Indigenous communities, often due to the simple reason of them not fitting into the Western preconceptions of what knowledge and theory should look like. Conversely, Indigenous methodology helps find ways to approach Indigenous knowledges on their own terms as much as this is possible under the conditions when research is conducted not in the Indigenous languages and by non-Indigenous researchers carrying different ontologies and epistemologies. Applying the Indigenous research paradigm also teaches us how to put the Indigenous worldview into practice, in this case, in the research domain, very clearly showing that the Indigenous worldview is not some romanticised fantasy, but a very concrete approach to seeing, experiencing and doing things in ways that are very different from the mainstream Western approaches. As Shawn Wilson [2008: 13] suggests, by understanding how research can be Indigenous, it might be possible to “learn more about the bigger question of what it is to be Indigenous”.

Shawn Wilson [2008] also invites his readers to think about research as ceremony. He argues that, since the Indigenous ontology and epistemology are based on relationality — meaning that from the Indigenous point of view “relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality” [Wilson, 2008: 7], — the Indigenous axiology and methodology are to be based on “maintaining relational accountability” [ibid.: 11]. And in this sense, Wilson suggests that research is ceremony as it should seek to strengthen relationships.

Thus, Wilson [ibid.: 11] writes: “The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves”. This principle of relationality and relational accountability, from the perspective of the Indigenous research paradigm, is to be applied in all stages of the research process, including the choice of a research topic, data collection methods and forms of analysis and presentation of information [Wilson, 2008].

While working with the Ulchi community for this research project, I have sought to place the principle of relationality at the core of every step. First of all, the Indigenous research paradigm calls the researcher to reflect on their positionality and how it might affect their own community and the community they are working with. It is also the responsibility of the researcher to minimise any negative consequences of their work on the community and make sure the research benefits the involved community. The relationship with the Indigenous community should be established on their terms and the entire research project should be driven by the needs of the community rather than the needs of the external researchers, i.e., instead of being seen merely as subjects of research, the Indigenous research paradigm presupposes that the community should have a more active role in the project. As has been pointed out by Indigenous authors writing on the topic, the research should be carried out *with* an Indigenous community, instead of *on* it [Wilson, 2008]. Another common English phrase encapsulating the principle of relationality and responsibility towards Indigenous communities is ‘Nothing about us without us’. Thus, while doing research work with an Indigenous community, it is important to make sure that the community maintains control over the way the information is gathered, analysed, stored, disseminated and presented. I have sought to follow these principles by developing and maintaining the relationship with the community before, in the process and after the completion of the fieldwork, which, for me, has turned into a beautiful experience of human connection. In section 4.3, I will discuss how this has been done.

Second, the requirement that research should serve the needs of the community also translates into the expectation that the research topic and question should be determined by the community in line with their needs, rather than by the interests of an external researcher. The research question addressed in my work with the Ulchi community was: *How is the question of the meaning of human life conceptualised in the Ulchi tradition?* Initially, the more general research question about the conceptualisation of the question

of life's meaning in the Indigenous worldview originated from my research interest. However, while establishing the relationship with the Ulchi community, I made sure to confirm that this kind of work would be useful for the Nation and is needed on their side.

The Ulchi culture has been studied by a number of researchers from Russia, Germany, USA and Japan, however, it is still not a very well-researched community. Today, documenting the traditional Ulchi knowledge is important for the preservation of the culture. Furthermore, as I have been told by one person from the community, no one has looked at the Ulchi culture from the philosophical perspective before. Therefore, this research project can help document an aspect of the culture that has not been significantly addressed previously. Also, while ideally research should be carried out and initiated by the community and its own researchers, in many contexts it is not feasible due to the lack of researchers in the community as well as of mechanisms for connecting communities with researchers, as is the case with the Ulchi Nation. At the same time, there is a sense of urgency to preserve as much of the traditional knowledge that is being lost as possible, which has also been expressed by members of the community. Thus, I hope that this research and its topic can be helpful for the Ulchi community, both supporting the efforts of the older generation that is trying to preserve the knowledge, and creating materials for the younger generation that most likely would not have access to this information otherwise.

Third, the principle of relationality also translates into the choice of methods of data collection and analysis. From the perspective of Western ethnography, it can be said that the methods followed in this research project are, primarily, semi-structured interviews and, secondly, participant observation. However, it is difficult to describe the process of my interaction with members of the community using the strict terms of the interview method or to count the exact number of conducted interviews because in the process of fieldwork the line between interviews and casual conversations started to blur rather quickly. While I began with interviews based on pre-prepared questions, a lot of the information was shared by people with me during casual conversations over tea or a meal. As has been pointed out by Bastien and Coraiola [2023], the conversational approach to data collection (i.e., getting to know the culture) is more aligned with the Indigenous methodology paradigm than interviews that are commonly driven by the researcher and develop in one direction (from the researcher to the informant). The conversational approach presupposes an active involvement of both parties, which, for

example, also implies that the researcher should introduce and position themselves as well and share information about themselves, thus, helping establish a reciprocal relationship. Therefore, the conversational approach seems to describe the process of data collection in this project more accurately. At the same time, since establishing a relationship with every person takes time and with some people I had a chance to speak only once, it was not always possible to use the conversational method.

Finally, the principle of relationality has been followed also while analysing data and presenting the results of the research. No personal data or sensitive information shared by the participants has been included in this text in order to avoid negative impact on the community. The information shared by the community, when presented publicly has been run through some members of the community, who provided feedback on the text. Their feedback has also been sought on the final draft of this chapter. Eventually, as has been agreed on with the community, the text of the thesis will be shared with the local libraries. In addition, since this text is written in English, which is not accessible to many people in the community, a separate publication in Russian will be prepared and also shared with the community.

4.2 Methods

Data collection for this research project was carried out during three fieldtrips to the Ulchi community as well as through online means of communication. For fieldwork, I visited Bulava (the village considered the main centre of the Ulchi culture), as well as Bogorodskoe (the administrative centre of the Ulchski District) and Khabarovsk (the capital of the Khabarovsk Krai) three times: in July 2023, November 2023, and July 2024. In total, I spent around one month in the fieldtrips. During the three visits, I participated in approximately 35 interviews-conversations with members of the community. It is difficult to count the exact number of conducted conversations because, as has been mentioned above, the line between interviews and casual conversations began to blur rather quickly in the course of fieldwork.

In total, over those three visits I spoke with 26 people from the Ulchi community. An anonymised list of community members who have provided information for this project is shown in Table 1. This number includes the people with whom I had interviews-

conversations, however, often more people were present during these interactions, mainly relatives of the main informants. Furthermore, I also had informal conversations with a number of people from the region who do not identify as Ulchi, which was helpful for understanding the broader politico-economic and cultural context in the region.

Given the objective of the project to learn about the Ulchi tradition, the majority of the people I spoke with were from the older generation, born in the 1930s–50s. As it often happens during ethnographic work, the relationship that I managed to establish with some people was/is stronger than with others, and there are a few people who can be considered my primary contacts in the community. These people generously offered help with connecting me with other members of the community and, overall, with the task of learning about the Ulchi culture. At the same time, it is important to be aware of the potential impact of such relationships on research, in the sense of shaping the outcome [Spradley, 1979]. This has been as much as possible addressed through data source triangulation (double-checking information with different informants), which is, however, rather difficult in the case of the Ulchi community given the small number of people who have access to the traditional knowledge. Additionally, observations about the life of the community were made in informal settings as well as at cultural events. I have also worked with literature on the Ulchi culture [Zolotarev, 1939; Smolyak, 1966; Rosugbu & Kazama, 2007; Shrenk, 2011; Van Ysslestyne, 2018; Udy, 2023] and Ulchi–Russian and Russian–Ulchi dictionaries [Sunik, 1985; dictionaries compiled by members of the community]. Finally, I had a video call and exchanged a number of emails with a student of Jan Van Ysslestyne’s, who was one of the ethnographers who studied the Ulchi culture, particularly Ulchi shamanism.

Table 1. **Anonymised list of informants from the Ulchi community**

<i>Informant</i>	<i>Place of living</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age group</i> <i>(<25, 26–45, >46)</i>
Informant 1	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 2	Bulava	M	>46
Informant 3	Bulava	M	>46
Informant 4	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 5	Bulava	F	>46

Informant 6	Bulava	F	26–45
Informant 7	Bulava	M	>46
Informant 8	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 9	Bulava	M	>46
Informant 10	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 11	Bulava	M	>46
Informant 12	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 13	Bulava	F	>46, passed away
Informant 14	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 15	Bulava	F	26–45
Informant 16	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 17	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 18	Bulava	F	>46
Informant 19	Bogorodskoe	F	>46
Informant 20	Bogorodskoe	F	>46
Informant 21	Bogorodskoe	M	>46
Informant 22	Bogorodskoe	F	>46
Informant 23	Bogorodskoe	F	>46
Informant 24	Mongol	F	>46
Informant 25	Khabarovsk	M	>46
Informant 26	Voronezh	F	>46

Conversations with every community member would start with an introduction of myself and of the purpose of the research project, followed by general questions about the informant(s) and their background, eventually leading to a discussion on the topic of the project. The following questions were posed in order to start a conversation about the concepts of meaningfulness in the Ulchi culture:

- What did your parents and grandparents teach you about how to live your life?
- What values do you try to instil in your children/grandchildren?
- What does it mean to live a good life according to the Ulchi worldview? What does it mean to you?
- Are there any expressions that denote the concept of the meaning of life in the Ulchi language?
- What kind of expressions are used to talk about life?
- What does it mean to be an Ulch/Ulchanka?

- Are there any stories that talk about the meaning of human life or about what it means to live a good life?

Most interactions took place in person, however, some exchanges happened over video or audio calls and through text messages. A total of 22 interviews-conversations were recorded. The conversations that took place in a more casual setting were not recorded, and also some people refused to be recorded at all. All conversations took place in Russian, with the use of Ulchi words and phrases, which were translated to me by the informants. In addition to the recordings, I took notes during or after every conversation and also wrote a diary of the observations made during each day of fieldwork. The transcriptions and notes were studied for conceptual representations of the topic of life's meaning in the Ulchi culture during fieldwork, at the end of each day, and after the end of each fieldtrip, aiming to single out the main themes and topics. During the second and third fieldtrips, the previously collected data and analysis carried out were discussed with the informants to make sure that my representation of the Ulchi culture is accurate. Additional details on the topic were collected in the second and third fieldtrips as well. Finally, during the third fieldtrip, together with the community members I collected data on the traditional Ulchi medicines (the idea was inspired by one community member), which is planned to be published as a separate book for the community use.

4.3 My relationship with the Ulchi community

Indigenous methodology and the underlying principle of relationality calls the researcher to, first of all, situate themselves [Wilson, 2008], therefore, this is what I will start this section with. I am of mixed Slavic ancestry, born in Tajikistan shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union. My family left Dushanbe in 1990 because of the civil war and I grew up in Volgograd, Russia, in the Russian culture, as a Russian citizen and speaking Russian as my mother tongue. Over the course of the 20th century, a number of my ancestors on both the maternal and paternal side saw displacement, dekulakisation, exiles and wars, and some were executed under Stalin's repressions. One of my great grandfathers was exiled to Siberia to a labour camp. The system of labour camps played an important role in the economic development of the Soviet Union and resultant ecological damage, including on the traditional lands of Indigenous communities. Thus, I have been working with the Ulchi community as an ethnically Russian (*русская*)

researcher, whose identity and family history is entangled in a complex system of political relations in the country. This kind of positionality inevitably impacts my work with the community, of which I have tried to be aware of throughout this project, as much as possible mitigating the potential negative impact on the community and the outcomes of the project.

For the fieldwork, I intended to work with an Indigenous community in Russia, first of all, because to me it appears important to make a contribution to the understanding of the situation with the Indigenous Peoples in the country that I am from. Understanding the politico-economic and cultural context in which Indigenous communities in Russia live today is important on its own, and also it offers a critical lens for reflecting on the cultural, political and economic trajectory of the whole country. On the international scale, writing about Indigenous communities in Russia can help add new perspectives to Indigenous studies. The Indigenous communities from Russia may share some struggles with, for example, the Indigenous communities of North America, while other struggles might be unique to each context. While the main audience of my research on the Ulchi culture is the Ulchi community and I hope it can be useful to them, I also hope that it can contribute to the broader debates about both the thriving and the struggles of Indigenous communities around the world.

When I started looking for an Indigenous community to work with, I reached out to a number of researchers and activists (*общественные деятели*) in Russia, asking about the need for the kind of work that I intended to conduct. Four people agreed to have a call with me sharing their opinion on the situation with the preservation of Indigenous traditions and knowledges in Russia. One of these four people was from the Ulchi community. Initially, I found the text of an interview with them online and was drawn to the way they were speaking about their culture and the importance of ethnic food to Indigenous people. During the first 1.5-hour call, they shared with me a lot of information about the Ulchi culture and their experience of growing up in an Ulchi village in the Soviet times. On the second call, I asked them if my research could be useful to the community and if they would be interested in working with me. They responded that since the community is small, they do not have their own researchers, and, hence, do appreciate it when external researchers come to work with them. Thus, the interest on the side of the community was the first defining factor for choosing to work with the Ulchi Nation.

Secondly, I was told that there are approximately 150 native speakers of the Ulchi language. According to the national census of 2010, there were 154 people speaking the Ulchi language in Russia (as opposed to 732 people in the 2002 census) [Federal State Statistics Service, 2010; Federal State Statistics Service, 2002]. In the 2020 national census, 506 people reported to speak the language, and 835 people reported that Ulchi is their mother tongue [Federal State Statistics Service, 2020]. However, as I found out later on, the situation with the preservation of the language is much more complex than the numbers might suggest. Even though there are people who speak the Ulchi language, the main language of everyday communication in the community is Russian, and the older generation is struggling with passing the language on to the youth. Nonetheless, the situation with the language in the Ulchi community is better than in some other Indigenous communities in the country. This is an important factor for the preservation of the traditional knowledge as the language is key to passing on the worldview and the values.

Thirdly, although the Ulchi community first was reached by the Cossacks (who were the main force in the exploration of the eastern lands by the Russian empire) in the 17th century, since they live in a remote area in taiga, they did not experience intense assimilation until the Soviet period, as opposed to some other Indigenous communities on the territory of Russia, who have seen more forced assimilation, including Christianisation. Thus, the Ulchi managed to preserve their traditional culture, including shamanic practices, significantly longer than some other communities. However, at the same time, being a settled community, they have seen a greater loss of the traditional culture than, for example, some nomadic communities. All in all, while a great part of the traditional culture has been lost during the Soviet and current times as the older generations who were more connected to the language passed away, some traditional knowledge has nonetheless been preserved and the older generation today still keeps this traditional knowledge alive.¹⁷

Because of this ongoing loss of the traditional knowledge, the community has expressed interest in research and publications that would help document the preserved knowledge. Of course, the efforts should go beyond writing and there is also a need for funding and concrete culture and language preservation programmes, but I hope that my work with the community can also be useful as one of the ways to pass on the knowledge to the

¹⁷ While the focus of this research project is on the traditional Ulchi knowledge, this does not suggest that the Ulchi culture has not evolved or does not continue to evolve adjusting to the new reality.

next generations. Another need expressed by the community is increased visibility, for which publications can also be helpful, and which eventually can help a small Indigenous community gain more negotiating power in political processes, because even in Russia many people do not know about the existence of the Ulchi. All in all, a number of people from the community expressed interest in having new publications written about the culture, regardless of the language of those publications. As was mentioned above, I intend to eventually publish a couple of texts based on this research in Russian.

Deep ethnographic research within a community would imply learning its language. Unfortunately, due to the time constraints combined with the interdisciplinary nature of my research project, which requires exploring a range of topics, I did not have an opportunity to spend a longer period of time within the community and learn the language. Nonetheless, I have been trying to pick up some words and expressions that are relevant for everyday interactions and the topic of my research (corresponding Ulchi terms will be included in the below sections of this chapter). However, I have to admit that this is not an easy task for a number of reasons. For example, the Ulchi language is not codified and different people might pronounce the same word or expression in different ways due to different dialects. Also, there are few materials available for learning the language, with some books having a very small print run, of slightly more than 100 copies. Nonetheless, I am hoping to continue connecting with the language. It can help me understand the Ulchi culture better, since, while interacting in Russian, the informants have to translate the Ulchi worldview into Russian concepts, with many nuances inevitably being lost in translation.

Having completed the fieldwork, I have been maintaining the relationship with a few people from the community, mainly through calls and text messages, and I am hoping to continue it into the future, doing further research work for and with the community. Some of the concepts that I came across within the Ulchi tradition pertaining to the topic of meaningfulness and a good life (see the sections below) could be found also in literature on other Indigenous traditions. However, carrying out this research work with the Ulchi community is important as it can be helpful for that specific community for the reasons mentioned above. Furthermore, from my personal perspective, carrying out this research work is important also because it teaches me how to place relationality at the centre of research work, specifically in the Russian context.

4.4 Ulchi in the past and today

The Ulchi are a Manchu-Tungus-speaking Nation, whose traditional land is located in the Far East of Russia, in the Khabarovsk Krai, the Ulchski District. The Ulchi are one of the eight Indigenous Nations living in the Khabarovsk Krai. According to the 2020 national Russian census [Federal State Statistics Service, 2020], there are 2,472 Ulchi living in Russia, including 449 living in cities and 2,023 living in the countryside. However, one informant suggested that these numbers are not accurate because not all Ulchi have participated in the census. The informant suggested that there should be a total of approximately 3,000 Ulchi living in the Khabarovsk Krai and another 500 elsewhere in the country. Overall, counting Indigenous people is not an easy task in the Russian context. One of the factors that has been mentioned by some informants is the flexible identity that some Ulchi, especially those with mixed ancestry, might be exhibiting depending on the circumstances. For example, this can be the case in relation to fishing rights, because Indigenous Peoples receive certain fishing quotas that non-Indigenous populations do not have.

The term Ulchi (ульчи in Russian) is an exonym proposed by Leopold Ivanovich Shrenk who worked with the peoples of the Amur in 1854–1856 [Sunik, 1985] and it eventually became commonly accepted during the Soviet times. Other scholars, including Lev Yakovlevich Shternberg and Orest Petrovich Sunik, suggested that the ethnonym is incorrect and originates from the name of one of the Ulchi clans (Olchi) [Sunik, 1985]. One informant shared with me another theory about the origin of the word ‘Ulchi’ that has been proposed by a relative of his: when the Cossacks reached the Ulchi lands in the 17th century, they were asking locals ‘Who are you?’ in Russian.¹⁸ The locals were asking the same question back, but in their language, which sounded as ‘Yŭ cu?’ (‘Ui sŭ’). The story suggests that the Cossacks may have misheard it as ‘ulchi’.

However, the Ulchi have traditionally used, and continue to use among themselves, a different endonym — *Hāh’u* (*Nani*). This endonym is a combination of two Ulchi words *hā* (*na*), which means land, and *h’u* (*ni*), which means people. Therefore, *Hāh’u* translates as ‘the people of the land’, ‘the people of this land’. Jan Van Ysslestyne in the book *Spirits from the Edge of the World: Classical Shamanism in Ulchi Society* [2018] translates *Hāh’u*

¹⁸ The question of the language(s) used by the Cossacks is complex. Discussing this topic goes beyond the scope of the present dissertation, therefore, for the sake of simplicity, it can be said that they were speaking Russian. Also, this is how the story was shared with me.

as the ‘people of the Earth’. When the name *Hāh’u* is translated into Russian, the issue of differentiating the words ‘land’ and ‘Earth/earth’ does not arise as the Ulchi word *hā* is translated as *земля*, which can mean land, planet Earth and soil. According to the biggest Ulchi–Russian dictionary, which was compiled by Sunik [1985], *hā* means land, country, place. Three informants I consulted on this matter suggested that *hā* in *Hāh’u* means land, place, location. However, another informant said that *hā* can mean *земля* in all senses, including soil, as well as can mean the universe, the place of living. It is difficult to tell to what extent the traditional identity of the *Hāh’u* was associated with the planet Earth, rather than the concrete land that they lived on, but no word meaning ‘planet’ exists in the language. On the other hand, in the interviews as well as in literature, I came across statements describing the Ulchi as the children of the *hā*, suggesting that they cannot/should not harm her. For example, one informant, talking about the Ulchi taboo on agriculture, said “We are *Hāh’u*. This is *hā*. How can we dig her?”^{19,20}

The Ulchski District is an administrative unit within the Khabarovsk Krai in the Far East of Russia, covering an area of approximately 40,000 km² and with an administrative centre in Bogorodskoe village. While there are a few villages in the district, the main centre of the Ulchi culture and population is Bulava village (Figure 3), which is located 62 kilometres south of Bogorodskoe and 757 kilometres north of the regional capital Khabarovsk. Today Bulava is considered the cultural centre of the Ulchi culture, with a museum, two art centres, two famous dance collectives (Giva and Diro) and a total Ulchi population of approximately 800 people. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, Bulava was significantly smaller. Traditionally, there existed a settlement (*стойбище* in Russian) where currently Old Bulava (the old part of the village) is located. However, another settlement, Udan, was initially bigger, until in 1935, due to a big flood, people moved to Bulava. Later, people from other settlements, including Aori, Kadi, Suchu, Olkoto, Kidi, Khyvandan, Peda and Pulsa, also moved to Bulava, some of them because of the inflow of Slavic settlers in the 20th century. Thus, Bulava grew and became the main centre of the Ulchi culture in the region. In the 1970s, two ships with approximately 500 former Soviet prisoners arrived in Bulava to build the new part of the village, New Bulava. Up to

¹⁹ Some informants mentioned the taboo on digging the soil, and that the Ulchi did not practice agriculture until the Soviet period. For example, in the book *Kolchem Village*, which is based on Victor Udy’s diary written during the Soviet times [Udy, 2023], there is a story about how the Ulchi were getting used to the practice of growing potatoes that was brought by the settlers and how for some it was a struggle. However, one informant suggested that some ethnographic literature on the Ulchi culture does mention that their ancestors may have practiced agriculture before moving to the Amur region, and it was simply not possible to continue practicing agriculture in taiga.

²⁰ The word *земля* (land) in Russian is female. Nouns in the Ulchi language do not have gender.

today, there exists a, not very strict but still visible division, between Old Bulava with mainly an Ulchi population and New Bulava with a mixed population. However, both make part of one administrative unit, Bulava village



Figure 3. Bulava village, view from the Amur, July 2024.

Source: Author's personal collection.

Ethnographer Aleksandr Mikhailovich Zolotarev [1939] who studied the Ulchi culture in the 1930s listed 25 Ulchi clans. Many of these clans have roots in other ethnic groups and had moved to the Amur from elsewhere. Some clans have preserved stories telling about the place that their ancestors came from and how they travelled and assimilated with the local people. For example, it is believed that Aori village (does not exist anymore but remains an important place in the collective memory), was founded by the Beldy clan, which is of Nanai origin but became Ulchi. Bulava is believed to have been founded by the Olchi or Duvan clan, and Kadi village by the Duvan clan. The Duvan clan, in its turn, consists of two parts, one of the Ainu origin, which moved from Sakhalin because of a smallpox epidemic in the 1860s, and one of the Nivkh origin. While not related, both clans share the same family name because they all lived on a cliff (*ḍyḅə*, *duve*, in Ulchi) near De-Kastri on the Okhotsk Sea. As was suggested by one informant, it was most likely the Ainu part of the Duvan clan that founded Bulava and Kadi. Anna Vasilievna Smolyak [1966], who also studied the Ulchi Nation, suggested that the Dechuli and Valdyu clans were of the Nanai origin, referring to the stories about their ancestors moving from the Nanai land. However, one informant, drawing on preserved stories, suggested that both clans are of the Ducher origin, i.e., northern Manchu, and previously lived on the Songhua River. Thus, the Dechuli moved downstream the Amur in order to avoid a war with the

Mongols. Smolyak [1966] also wrote that many Dechuli families had their own family fires (traditionally, each clan would have its own fire) and, therefore, probably were not related but rather used to be one tribe, which eventually turned into a clan.²¹

Thus, it can be said that the Ulchi identity has traditionally had multiple layers. On the one hand, the clan played an important role in a person's life, shaping their spiritual and economic practices according to the clan traditions. On the other hand, many Ulchi families are related to other neighbouring nations, the memory of which is preserved in the culture through legends and also manifests in the language. For example, the language of the Ulta people living in Sakhalin is very similar to the Ulchi language. One informant shared a story about a relative who travelled to Sakhalin and there encountered people who were speaking a language identical to the Ulchi language. Furthermore, historically, the region was connected by a developed trade system, which reached neighbouring Indigenous Nations as well as China, Korea and Japan. Among the Ulchi, also existed a tradition of taking brides from Sakhalin and Kamchatka, where the Ulchi would travel by sea in rowboats.

Traditionally, the life of the Ulchi was closely connected to the Amur River (*Маңгу*, *Mangu* in Ulchi, which means 'strong water', 'big river'), on the shores of which they have lived and which remains central in the life of many members of the community also today (Figure 4). Being surrounded by taiga, they did not practice agriculture and relied on fishing, hunting and foraging. Fishing has traditionally been the main economic activity for the Ulchi, and still remains central to the identity of many members of the community. There is no oil and gas extraction in the Ulchski District. However, a pipe connecting extraction sites in Sakhalin with the mainland runs through the district, due to which some cultural projects for the community have been funded by oil and gas companies, including Exxon in the past.

²¹ A clan is a smaller social group based on family relationships, whereas a tribe is a larger unit made up of clans.



Figure 4. The Amur, Bulava village, November 2023.

Source: Author's personal collection.

Historically, the Ulchi also used a network of paths connecting the Amur with the sea, where the Ulchi would also hunt and fish. Each clan had its own territory both on the land and on the river that they used for hunting and fishing. Members of other clans could not access those without permission, and everyone knew the borders of each clan's territory. As will be discussed below, the traditional economic practices of the Ulchi were closely intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and practices.

The life of the Ulchi Nation started to change drastically in the 1930s during the Soviet times. Although the Ulchi first came into contact with the Cossacks in the 17th century, they remained not that significantly impacted by the Russian culture and to a great extent continued to practice their traditional lifestyle. However, the Soviet economic development policy, which involved also the Far East, brought to the Amur, including the Ulchi land, a large number of settlers. In the Ulchi District, most of them worked in fish processing in kolkhozes (collective farms). The relationship between the settlers and the locals varied, ranging from friendship to open discrimination, however both settlers and the Ulchi changed in the process of interacting. In some cases, the settlers mastered the Ulchi and other local Indigenous languages, and many have adopted the Ulchi tradition of making offerings before fishing and hunting.

A major loss to the Ulchi culture was brought by Stalin's repressions of 1937–1938,²² which led to the execution of a number of Elders and knowledge keepers. In the following years, the practice of shamanism was banned and prosecuted. Also, as many informants put it, during those years their parents and grandparents were focused on surviving and providing for their families, and there was no time for passing on the traditional knowledge. Moreover, the Soviet ideology brought with it the idea of progress and development, portraying the traditional Ulchi lifestyle (as well as of other Indigenous Nations) as outdated and barbarian. Many members of the community wholeheartedly embraced the ideas of communism and opposed the old ways in favour of progress and modernity. Furthermore, in boarding schools the children were encouraged to speak Russian. All subjects were taught in Russian and the Ulchi language was not taught at all, eventually leading to the replacement of the latter with the former in everyday communication. As a result, as one informant put it, by the time they would finish middle school, children would become Russian.

All these factors led to the disruption of the tradition, and the older generation today, those who were born in the 1940–50s have limited knowledge of the pre-Soviet times, the Ulchi tradition and language. The older generation expresses regrets over the fact that opportunities to practice the language are very rare as there are very few fluent speakers left, Russian has replaced Ulchi in everyday communication, and the younger generation does not know the language at all. Today, in Bulava the language is taught at school as an extracurricular activity from the first to the fourth grade, and many children choose to learn English or other subjects instead, as those might be more useful for their further studies. Some schools, including in the administrative centre Bogorodskoe, do not offer Ulchi classes at all. A few people in the community organise various activities and events to teach children the language, however, it is difficult due to limited resources, including the limited teaching materials. This urgent need for resources to support language preservation has also led to collaborations with oil and gas companies operating in the region. For example, previously some language projects were funded by Exxon.

²² A number of members of the community were charged with espionage in favour of Japan. Some were detained in a camp in Nikolaevsk-on-the-Amur for many months, and a number of them eventually were released and managed to return back home, whereas some died of starvation [Van Ysslestyne, 2018]. Some other members of the community were detained, loaded on a barge together with other prisoners and the barge was sunk in the Amur Liman. Their bodies have not been found.

However, despite the assimilation that the Ulchi community went through during the Soviet times and continues to experience also today, the tradition was not fully lost. Some traditional norms were observed also during the Soviet times. A few informants told stories about a split that existed in their families, where the father would be a strict communist and would not follow the Ulchi ways, and the mother, on the contrary, would carry on making offerings, feeding Spirits and telling traditional stories to children. Therefore, women played an important role in passing on the traditional knowledge within families. Also, during the Soviet times, there were still shamans in the community who continued carrying out rituals and healings for the people even amidst the ban. Although the main Ulchi celebration, the Bear festival, was outlawed, the shamans continued to play an important role in the life of the Ulchi communities during the Soviet times, maintaining the traditional spiritual connection between the Ulchi and the land.

The Ulchi shamans and elders also played an important role in the preservation of the culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. Some of them even travelled to the Washington State, USA, and taught the Ulchi spiritual practices there. Initially, some Ulchi and Nanai shamans were invited there by a Russian entrepreneur, and later on a few people from the Ulchi community, particularly, Nadezhda Duvan and Mikhail Duvan, developed a close relationship with the US-based researcher Jan Van Ysslestyne who, based on their interaction over years, wrote the book *Spirits from the Edge of the World: Classical Shamanism in Ulchi Society* [2018]. The book is a collection of stories, songs and legends describing the Ulchi culture and particularly the shamanic tradition of the Ulchi community. As Van Ysslestyne's student, who has continued this work after Van Ysslestyne's death, told me, Nadezhda and Mikhail were coming to the USA intentionally. There they gave many lectures and — with the permission of local Indigenous peoples — carried out Ulchi²³ shamanic rituals to share their knowledge. I have been told that during their visits to the USA, Mikhail and Nadezhda also shared some Ulchi rituals (the Salmon ritual, Water ritual and Tree ritual) with members of Indigenous communities in Oregon, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs, who had lost the knowledge of their traditional rituals due to colonisation. Explaining why they were so keen to share their knowledge, Nadezhda and Mikhail would say: "We are all *Hāh'u*, everyone needs to have this knowledge". In addition to believing that it was important to share the Ulchi

²³ While in general it is possible to talk about the Ulchi tradition of shamanism, it is also important to note that every shaman had their own way of conducting rituals as instructed by their Spirit helpers, and/or according to their family tradition. For example, as Van Ysslestyne suggests in the book, Mikhail Duvan combined the Ulchi traditions with the traditions of other nations based on his ancestry.

spiritual knowledge, as Van Ysslestyne's student put it, doing this work on the West Coast of North America, they were trying to create some sort of a backup for their culture, which at the time was being lost in the traditional Ulchi land. Today, thanks to their teachings and Van Ysslestine's efforts to record the knowledge, important parts of it have been preserved for the future generations.

This interesting example of Indigenous internationalism [Jobin, 2023] connecting the Ulchi land with the opposite side of the Pacific Ocean shows how, while being a small nation, which remains unknown to many people both in and outside of Russia, the life of the Ulchi is woven into the network of Indigenous spiritual and ecological knowledge in the region and globally. At the same time, within the community the older generation is rather pessimistic about the future of the culture and believe that in a couple of decades the language will most likely disappear. However, they, nonetheless, continue to make efforts to preserve as much of the traditional Ulchi knowledge as possible, including through the language, crafts, songs and dance. Today, performative arts remain a major manifestation of Indigenous cultures in Russia that receives support and visibility, with many ethnic collectives from various Indigenous Nations, including the Ulchi Diro and Giva, performing at various local and national events.²⁴ On the other hand, other aspects of the culture, such as languages and spiritual and ecological knowledges, receive less or no support.

In the Ulchi tradition, the same as in many other Indigenous cultures, the spiritual, linguistic, ecological and economic dimensions of life are seen as intertwined and are not separated. The current situation with the preservation of the Ulchi culture is a clear example of this, as well as of the dissonance that Shalene Jobin [2023] writes about (see Chapter 3). The continuation of the traditional lifestyle and passing on of traditional values become an increasingly difficult task for Indigenous communities trying to survive in a capitalist system. The dissonance originates from the traditional value of respecting nature and living in harmony with the Spirits of the place, which is central to the culture, has to be put away in order for people to survive and provide for their families. As a result, many people from the community rely on fishing and hunting for sale, sometimes ending up overfishing (although, of course, the ecological impact of individual fishers and hunters

²⁴ One of the reasons why performative arts have played an important role in the preservation of the Ulchi culture was the Soviet policy supporting Indigenous art collectives (*художественная самодеятельность*) [Degai et al., forthcoming].

is, nonetheless, not comparable to that of industrial-scale fishing). By law, Indigenous Peoples in Russia receive fishing quotas, however, often people end up fishing illegally (for example, if they missed the annual application deadline for quotas, which requires a number of documents, including providing proof of the Indigenous status), which runs at odds with the traditional way of relating to the land and beings inhabiting it that the Ulchi developed over centuries of living on the land. As one informant put it: “Our life is not in poaching, but in fishing”, thus, pointing out the centrality of fishing to the Ulchi culture and the dissonance that engaging in illegal fishing creates. Or, as Elo-Hanna Seljamaa put it, encapsulating the situation of many Indigenous Peoples around the world, people who know how to live sustainably often do not have the possibility to practice such a sustainable economy.²⁵ At the same time, during both the Soviet period and the current capitalist period, the values that traditionally underpinned more sustainable economic practices have been progressively replaced by the ideas of development and accumulation, and the value of the Indigenous traditional knowledge has been downplayed both within and outside of the Indigenous communities in the country. As a result, today, it is becoming more and more difficult for people in the community both to connect with the traditional ecological and spiritual knowledge, and to put into practice.

The example of the Ulchi, as well as of other Indigenous communities around the world, shows that the values of ecological living might not necessarily be enough for changing or resisting the socioeconomic system. In the remaining part of the thesis, I will be reflecting on how these values are, nonetheless, essential for any radical change in the functioning of the system to happen, and what in this sense Western environmental movements, including degrowth, can learn from the Indigenous worldview in general and the Ulchi specifically.

4.5 Ulchi worldview

Jan Van Ysslestyne [2018, 1] wrote: “The Ulchi (*Nani*) conception of the world is based on a foundation of animism; everything in their environment is perceived as a living being

²⁵ This very accurate summary of the situation was proposed by Elo-Hanna as a discussant in a session of the 2023 ASEES (Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies) conference where I presented this work.

endowed with reason and spirit. Like their ancient ancestors, the Ulchis²⁶ believe in the existence of spirits whose actions affect people, animals, plants, objects, and occurrences in the natural world. According to this worldview, everything — from mountains, rivers, lakes, and forests to people — is governed by invisible powers and spirit masters.”

The Ulchi have traditionally practiced shamanism. The word shaman derives from the Manchu-Tungus term *sama* (*сaмa* in Ulchi), which means ‘a wise person’, ‘a person who knows’. The figure of the shaman was (and for some people also today continues to be) central to the functioning of the Ulchi society. The shamans would conduct healing ceremonies, communicate with the Spirits, including the Spirits of the land and the Spirits of the dead, and perform other rituals, this way helping the functioning of the community and maintaining the connection between the people and the spirit world. In the Ulchi tradition, there are different levels of shamans, from the novice shamans who are just starting (called *баӰ бу сaмa*, *bai bi sama*), to the big shaman *дaӰ сaмa* (*dai sama*) who serves as an intermediary between people and Spirits, to the most powerful *kasa* shamans (*қaсa сaмa*) who can accompany the souls of the deceased into the Lower World. A separate category of shamans would work specifically with children. Although spiritual practices were regulated and not all practices were open to everyone, all people in the community were involved in the spiritual life. For example, every family would own a drum and carry out their own rituals [Van Ysslestyne, 2018]. Moreover, many people, including many of the interviewees I have worked with, had or still have a particular connection with the spirit world, which manifests in such abilities as healing capacity, prophetic dreams (for example, about how the hunt would go), clairvoyance, etc.

As one informant put it, in the Ulchi tradition, there is no clearly defined and codified philosophy as in the Western tradition. The Ulchi worldview lies at the root of all aspects of the culture. For example, the traditional Ulchi house represents a small model of the Ulchi worldview, and by just growing up in it a child would absorb the knowledge, without necessarily having to be instructed about it. Thus, a traditional house would have two load-bearing posts, which would represent the male and the female energy. The house would be oriented towards the cardinal directions. From the Ulchi point of view, the east

²⁶ Van Ysslestyne uses ‘Ulchis’ as the plural form of Ulchi. There is no codified way of transliterating/translating Ulchi words into English in general, including the word ‘Ulchi’. However, it can be considered incorrect as in Russian the word Ulchi is already plural, whereas the singular form is Ulch (улчы).

(*дюлаху, dyulahi*) is the main direction, it is the beginning. The south (*дәж'у, daji*) is where the sun gains its greatest power. The west (*пэрху, perhi*) is the direction in which people walk on the path of the ancestors. The north (*ому, oti*) is the dark side. Thus, the main side of a traditional Ulchi house would face east and have a small vent (*чоңко, chonko*) in it that would be opened at the dawn, so that the first sun rays could enter the house without any barriers and bring in life force. The southern side is considered the good side, and the home altar with idols (*сэвэһ, saven*) would be placed on the southern wall of the house [Van Ysslestyne, 2018].

The same four directions are believed to exist in all the three worlds that the reality is divided into in the Ulchi tradition (as well as in many other Indigenous traditions): the Upper World (the world of the Spirits), the Middle World (the world of the people), and the Lower World (the world of the dead). All three worlds are inhabited by people, but human people live only in the Middle World. Thus, Ulchi apply the word 'people' to all other beings as well. As one informant said: "In taiga, there are also people. In other worlds, there are also people". Human people are differentiated by the name *мыһ һ'у (mun ni)*, meaning 'our people'. In this worldview, all people (human and non-human) are considered equal and humans are never put above other beings, as all beings are seen as the children of the Creator, *Эндүрү (Enduri)*. The three-world structure of creation manifests also in the image of the Tree of Life, which would also be embroidered on bridal robes (Figure 5) in the form of the world tree or the clan tree, with the clan tree, correspondingly, being part of the world tree. Overall, the art of embroidery is very developed in the Ulchi tradition, reflecting the worldview and traditionally being preserved by the clans (each clan would have its own patterns that could not be used by others). Different patterns represented different animals and also had messages encoded in them. For example, one common pattern is foetus, which represents a wish to have children or, more broadly, the continuation of life.



Figure 5. Ulchi bridal robe, Bogorodskoe Local Museum Collection, July 2024.

Source: Author's personal collection.

Traditionally, the Ulchi life would be regulated by a developed system of laws (*Hān'u doro*, *Nani doro*, Ulchi law, or *Hān'u dorony*, *Nani dorony*, Ulchi laws) and taboos (*эн'еву*, *enevu*). The knowledge of the *Hān'u doro* would be passed on to children unobtrusively, through legends and stories. The only exception would be taboos, in which case relatives would clearly instruct the children that certain things should not be done. Some of such taboos include, for example, spitting in a fire or shooting a tiger.

The Ulchi stories offer a window into the Ulchi ways of being and knowing. One of the principles that comes through the Ulchi stories is relationality with non-human beings. For example, one legend — common for all Tungus people and similar to legends existing in many Indigenous cultures in North America — talks about a flood:

There was a big flood, which flooded everything. Everywhere around, there was only water. The only creature that remained was a loon, which lives in two elements — water and air. The loon dived, trying to reach the bottom of

the sea. After three days, the loon came up to the surface and did not find anything. The loon rested and dived again. The loon was away for five days and again found nothing. The loon dived the third time and was away for seven days. This time, the loon held in the beak a small lump of soil, and from that all the land started.²⁷

This story suggests a particular relationship between the Ulchi people and the loon. In the Ulchi culture, the loon is seen as a mediator between the people and the Water Spirits, which also manifests in rituals. For example, when an offering would be made to the Spirit of the Water (*Тэмы, Temu*), ritual utensils shaped as a loon would be used.

Special relationships also exist with other animals, the major one being tiger, who is considered the Master of the Middle World. The Ulchi would not hunt the tiger as killing or injuring a tiger was a taboo and was believed to bring harm to the hunter and their family. The reverence towards the Spirit of the tiger is shown in the way it is addressed. Instead of using the word *дусэ (duse)*, which translates as ‘tiger’, the animal is usually called *Амба (Amba)*, which means a ‘powerful one’ [Van Ysslestyne, 2018]. This is particularly the case when people would address the Spirit of the tiger (using the word *дусэ* would be disrespectful in this case), but also when talking about the animal in general. The shamans would also enter into particular relationships with Amba. Thus, Van Ysslestyne [ibid.] writes that Chita Duvan, an elder brother of shaman Mikhail Duvan’s, survived a tiger attack and later became a tiger shaman who could make tigers obey him. Another shaman, Chika Valdyu Anga (1915–1998), as Van Ysslestyne [ibid.: 48] writes, “became a wife to a tiger spirit and gave birth to flying tiger offspring, who served her as spirit protectors and guides in the other worlds.”

The second most important animal in the Middle World is the bear, called *буйы (buyu)* or *мана (mana)* (also translated as an ‘old man’, ‘ancient man’). The Bear Spirit is believed to connect all living beings to the world of their ancestors and also to connect humans with the other worlds [Van Ysslestyne, 2018]. Furthermore, the Ulchi would become relatives of the Bear if they were born as twins or if a woman gave birth to twins. Bears usually give birth to two cubs, and the Ulchi believe that a person born as a twin or a

²⁷ This is a translation of the story as it was told by an informant in Russian, with only small changes made for the purposes of translation. For example, in Russian, the loon (*гагара*) is feminine, therefore, the informant used the pronoun she. In the translation, the pronoun is replaced with the noun in order to avoid confusion.

woman having given birth to twins has a special connection to the Bear Spirit. A woman who gave birth to twins was called a 'taiga woman'. Having such a connection to the Bear Spirit, she would know when a bear was killed by someone from the community on a hunt. She would enter a trance-like state and sing and dance, signalling to the people in the village to prepare for the hunters' return [ibid.: 76]. Nadezhda Duvan [quoted in Van Ysslestyne, 2018: 77] said: "The secret among the taiga women is that they all report having unusual dreams where they are wandering through the forest and meet the Bear spirit disguised as a young man. They become as man and wife and later on give birth to twins in the earthly realm." It should be noted that in the Ulchi tradition, the same as in many other Indigenous traditions, dreams are considered a special realm where people can interact with Spirits, receive learnings or find out the future. Van Ysslestyne [2018: 51] also wrote: "The union of Bear spirits with human women were venerable events. Such events occurred as far back as anyone could remember, and they would reinforce and strengthen the cooperative partnership between humans, animals, and the spirits of nature".

Among the fish living in the Amur, the kaluga and other types of sturgeon are considered sacred. When a kaluga or sturgeon was caught, pieces of the fish would be shared with everyone, and it was forbidden to catch a lot of it. They could not be used in rituals and offerings, or be fed to cats or dogs. This kind of relationality with specific species was common also for other ethnic groups living in the region. For example, the Nanai also revered the bear, including through the celebration of the Bear festival, which was the biggest celebration in the Ulchi culture as well. In addition to the relationships with particular species that all people in the Ulchi society shared, special relationships also existed on the level of clans. For example, each clan has its own creation story that tells about its emergence from a specific animal, which can be a real animal or a mythical being, for example, a dragon (one of such stories is included in the next section).

The Ulchi relations expand also to plants, which are recognised as living beings with their own spirit. For example, wild garlic (*судули*, *suduli*) is an intermediary in people's communication with Spirits, whereas Labrador tea (*сэһкүрэ*, *sankura*) is used for smudging, cleansing spaces and people, and also during shamanic conjuring. Furthermore, people traditionally would not cut living trees for logs, but only collect dry wood. Cutting a living tree was considered a taboo (*эһөө*). However, this could be allowed in outstanding circumstances. If a person really needed to cut a tree to provide

for their family, they would make an offering to the Spirits asking for permission. The same principle also applied to killing young or weak animals. Overall, any foraging practice — as well as hunting and fishing — would be regulated by the principle of self-limitation, i.e., the rule that you should not take more than what you need (see the next section for further details).

Thus, the Ulchi would never assume that they have intrinsic rights over other beings, be it fish, animals or plants, or over the land. Before taking anything from the river or from taiga, they would start a fire and make an offering to the corresponding Spirit, asking the Spirit to let them take what they came for and not be upset with them. Only after making an offering, they could take what they needed. The process of making an offering and asking spirits for help is called *кэси гэлэву* (*kesi gelevu*), which literally means ‘asking for happiness’. Offerings were made corresponding to the kind of the Spirit addressed, respecting the principle of reciprocity. For example, when praying to the Water Spirit *Тэму*, offerings could not include anything that comes from the river, for example, fish, as it would be disrespectful to offer the Spirit something that it initially gave to the people. On the contrary, offering something that comes from taiga, for example, berries, would be appropriate. Thus, the principle of reciprocity plays an important role in the Ulchi understanding of their relationship with the land that they live on.

The same as with plant and animal species, the Ulchi also have traditionally revered their relationships with places, for example, with cliffs (Aori Cliff) and mountains (Mount Shaman (*Тэу, Теу*)), which make part of their sacred geography. Such places are revered and made offerings to. Stories tell about the connections that people have with a place, or about the beings inhabiting it. For example, there have been many reports about people disappearing on Mount Shaman, and a few legends talk about the powerful shaman that lives inside of the mount and prevents people from approaching it. For example, during the Second World War, Ulchi shamans met up a few times on Mount Shaman for collective conjuring, asking the Spirits to approach the end of the war. In its turn, Aori Cliff (Figure 6) is believed to be the sleeping giant *Kaljiami* (*Калдями*), who, according to legends would kidnap children. The name of the village Bulava is believed to come from the word *булау* (*bulau*), which means ‘staff’, ‘stick’, because there was a powerful shaman in the village who could heal people with his staff or could break a metal cable with it.



Figure 6. Aori Cliff, view from the Amur, July 2024.

Source: Author's personal collection.

From the perspective of the Ulchi worldview, the relationship with the place is developed on a few levels. As one informant put it, when people live on the same place, the ancestors pass to the other world, becoming part of the land. This way a place becomes *ama hā* (*ama na*), the land of fathers, the land of ancestors. Having lived on the land for some time, people establish a good connection with the Spirits of taiga, the Spirits of the land, and eventually the deceased ancestors help maintain this connection as well. This is particularly the case if an ancestor was a shaman. Or, if an ancestor became a relative of the Bear Spirit, as described above, then the family would always have luck when hunting in taiga. Developing this kind of a relationship with the place takes time, as Spirits cannot be forced into making bonds. This is supposed to happen naturally. Eventually, over time, all Spirits and beings surrounding the Ulchi would become their relatives.

The traditional Ulchi network of relations also includes clan ancestors, to whom regular offerings are to be made. Traditionally, most rituals were carried out by clans separately, and people from different clans would only meet for a collective celebration during the Bear festival. Furthermore, there were (some people say they still exist) sacred clan places called *meu* (*meu*), where clans would conduct their rituals and make offerings.²⁸ People from other clans were not supposed to go to these places, and it was considered a big taboo to touch anything there or even worse break or take something from there.

²⁸ As retold in Van Ysslestyne's book [2018], Nadezhda Duvan said that the tradition of *meu* has Manchu roots. As was suggested by one informant, not every clan would have a *meu*, but only the ones of the Manchu origin, whereas others, for example, of the Nivkh origin, would not.

There are a number of stories about settlers who after moving to the Ulchi land would burn or damage idols (*сэвэн*, *saven*) from such places and shortly after experienced unexplainable diseases [Van Ysslestyne, 2018]. One informant also shared an interesting story from his childhood: as a 10-year-old he was hunting in taiga and suddenly saw a wood grouse. He followed the bird for a while, walking between trees. Eventually the bird went up a small hill and stepped on a path. The informant followed the bird, and saw a *meu* on the right side of the path. It looked like a big birdhouse and inside was decorated with red fabric with yellow flowers and Chinese hieroglyphs. Inside of the *meu*, there was a wooden bowl and a glass, indicating, that someone was making offerings there. The informant waited a little for the bird to go away from the *meu* and shot it. When he brought the bird home and told his mother what had happened, she ran to discuss it with elder Angin Kayu. Eventually, they decided to throw the bird out because it had pecked the *meu* a few times. They also asked the boy a few times if he had touched the *meu*, because no one, besides its owner, is allowed to touch it.

The way the Ulchi would traditionally interact with Spirits and elements was full of both respect and care. For example, it was important that during a ritual, when connections between this world and other worlds are established, the other world is protected from any bad things coming from this world. As one informant said, things had to be done in a sterile way, especially when dealing with bears and water Spirits. For this purpose, the Ulchi would use wood streamers, which do not let bad energy pass. Also, it was a taboo to speak loudly when travelling through a forest, across mountains or a body of water, because it could disturb the animals and Spirits [Van Ysslestyne, 2018]. Another revered Spirit is the Fire Spirit, *Пыжа* (*Puja*). When putting out a fire, people would say “Puja, pull up your legs”, in order to avoid harming the Spirit. The same would be done when an object was inserted in the ground, people would say “Sorry, the Master of the land, I will put the shovel in the soil now, move a little”. Every place, in the Ulchi worldview, is believed to have its own master, i.e., a Spirit that oversees it. For example, one informant shared the following story from his childhood: with his friends, he was playing a game which involved drawing a circle on the ground and dividing it into two parts, one half representing his territory and the other one his friend’s. They would then throw knives into each other’s territory. When his mother saw this, she scolded them asking why they were throwing knives in the ground. She said that it was an *эһевы*, as every territory has its own master.

One informant also shared that she heard stories that people would apologise to the land before relieving themselves and first would also ask the Master Spirit to move. Thus, the communication with Spirits was ongoing, people would talk to the Spirits of water, sky, taiga, house, etc. This communication happened with respect but also on equal terms. Stressing out the difference between the Ulchi way of communicating with Spirits and the way Christians communicate with God, one informant said, her grandmother could say to the wind or rain Spirit something like: “Come on, that’s enough, show us some mercy”.

This kind of relationality with nature and the place also reflected in the Ulchi perception of time, which was aligned with the natural cycles. Thus, traditionally, the Ulchi would follow a lunar calendar. As one informant put it, the lunar calendar ‘sat inside’ of them.²⁹ The lunar new year was an important celebration, when the family would pray asking for health for the family members, the clan and all the people. Also, other ceremonies and rituals would follow the lunar calendar, for example, the monthly mourning rituals for the deceased would be strictly aligned with the lunar phases for one year after a person’s death. In general, the Ulchi would not keep track of the chronological order of events, but would associate them with natural events. For example, if asked when they were born, a person could say ‘in the year of a big flood’, or ‘when the berries were ripening’, or ‘the year when there was a lot of chum salmon’. Thus, the perception of time was informed by and intertwined with a very profound knowledge of the land, the beings living on it and also planets and stars, with respect of their natural cycles and an engrained understanding of the dependence of human life on these cycles.

Therefore, the Ulchi traditionally experienced life through and in close relationship with the land they lived on and all the beings that inhabit it, as well as the spirit worlds. This relationality consisted of a complex network of connections and lines of accountability towards human and non-human beings. Moreover, it spanned over all dimensions of life, including the spiritual, economic and ecological aspects. In the Ulchi worldview, all these aspects of life seem to be intertwined manifestations of being in and through relationship with the land and all the beings that inhabit it, which manifests in all aspects of the community’s life, including the hunting and fishing practices, language, house layout, clothing and arts.

²⁹ Direct translation from the Russian ‘лунный календарь сидел внутри’.

4.6 Биву удэны

In the Ulchi language, there is an expression *биву удэны* (*bivu udeny*).³⁰ As Svetlana Vasilievna Angina, an Ulchi linguist who is compiling a new Ulchi–Russian dictionary,³¹ suggests, the expression can have a few meanings: 1) the place of living; 2) the period of living; and 3) about life, about the meaning of life. It was in the third meaning that this expression was mentioned to me by an informant as the closest translation of the Western notion ‘meaning of life’.³² The expression could be used, for example, in such a sentence as ‘*Биву удэны маңга*’ (*bivu udeny manga*), which can be translated as ‘Life is hard’.

However, as the same informant suggested, for his Ulchi ancestors the question of the meaning of life was not a question at all, because, from the perspective of the Ulchi worldview, “the meaning of being is in being itself”. Thus, this Ulchi concept is very different from the Western framings of the question of meaningfulness (i.e., the meaning of life and the meaning in life that were discussed in Chapter 1). What *биву удэны* conceptually means is the essence of life, i.e., it refers to being itself. This essence of being, from the Ulchi perspective, is always concrete, it is connected to the place. As the informant said, if you live on the shores of the Amur, you have to live according to the laws of the Amur. Thus, for the Ulchi, the essence of being manifests through and is the complex network of relationships described above (with the tiger, the bear, the Amur, etc.), it manifests through knowing the land and its relationships and, over time, through becoming part of those relationships and of the land itself. While starting in a concrete place where people live, this localised essence of being is also connected to other places and parts of creation. For example, through the Amur, the Ulchi are connected to Mongolia, China, the Pacific Ocean and all the peoples living along the course of the river and its tributaries. Traditional stories also talk about the relationships that exists between the Ulchi and more remote parts of the cosmos, including the moon and stars. Therefore, while essence of being for the Ulchi Nation is first of all localised and connected to the Amur, it is rooted in relationality extending far beyond the place where the Ulchi live. However, without a concrete place that serves as a starting point, where *биву*, being,

³⁰ The pronunciation and spelling can differ as the Ulchi language is not codified, and traditionally did not have a writing system. Furthermore, there are a few dialects. The informants used a few versions of both words: *буй* and *биву*; *удэн*, *удэны* and *удэни*. Here, I use the version that was used by the informants most often.

³¹ Dictionaries are also being compiled by a few other people that I have encountered.

³² Communication with the informants took place in Russian. The Russian term ‘*смысл жизни*’ is broadly equivalent to the English ‘meaning of life’.

takes place, no other relations and connections can exist. Without locality, no meaning can exist; or, put otherwise, being and meaning can emerge only in a place.

What is important is that this *ბივყ უდჳნყ* exists on its own, regardless of humans, who can become part of concrete being on a concrete land, but cannot create this essence of being. People's traditions are secondary to this *ბივყ უდჳნყ* and come out of the concrete being on the land. In this sense, human laws cannot contradict the localised essence of being. People adjust to the local essence of being by befriending local Spirits and learning about the local cycles and relationships. Through this kind of relationality, life itself and all the meanings that it comprises arise. Thus, the Ulchi concept *ბივყ უდჳნყ* is close to Burkhart's 'meaning-from-the-land' (see Chapter 3), which suggests that meanings come from the land itself, rather than is discovered or created by people, as it is understood in the Western philosophical tradition (as discussed in Chapter 1). Thus, the essence of being, in the Ulchi worldview, cannot be abstract, as opposed to the Western approaches that seek universal interpretations of what it means to live a meaningful life that could be applied to all of humanity. On the contrary, for the Ulchi, the essence of being is always concrete. At the same time, since *ბივყ უდჳნყ* is rooted in ecological thinking and ecological relationality, it offers a significantly broader understanding of meaningfulness that is connected to the environment, as opposed, to the Western concepts of meaningfulness that ignore the ecological dimension and focus primarily on the human experience as if it existed in a vacuum.

This way of ecological thinking also manifests in other aspects of the understanding of human life in the Ulchi tradition. Thus, when asked about what it means to live a good life, in addition to such common elements as happiness and health, and often even before those, most informants would say that it consists in living in harmony with nature, and more specifically in not taking more than what one needs. Therefore, in the Ulchi tradition, human life is understood, of course, through its social dimension, but also always through the ecological dimension. This value of self-limitation can be expressed in such Ulchi phrases as '*მალყუ აჟუ ჯაჲა*' (*malkhu eji japa*), meaning 'do not take a lot', or '*ჟჳკ, ჟჳკ ჯაჲაჲ*' (*jek, jek japa*), meaning 'take exactly'.

The values of self-limitation and relationality engraved in the Ulchi worldview were naturally cultivated in children through the language and through numerous legends that

talk about the consequences of greed. One example is the following story of the creation of the Milky Way:

There were two brothers, both were good hunters and fishermen, better than others. They started to compete with each other, trying to show who can get more catch. They started hunting animals for fun, for competition. One brother said “Do you want me to pull out that huge tree with the roots?” The other brother responded, “I can do more than that. Here is a mountain, do you want me to destroy it?” They started causing damage, more and more damage. Eventually, the Spirits got tired of it, and sent them to the Upper World.³³ And the brothers are still running there, along the Milky Way, which is a hunter’s ski track.

Ecological stories containing the idea of self-limitation are also woven into the clan creation stories. This story was shared with an informant by his relative Ekaterina Gavrilovna Obertalina (Rosugbu) who lived in the village Dudi. The story goes like this:

Ancestors lived on the shores of a sea, and decided to leave that place and moved along the coast until they reached the Amur Liman.³⁴ They stopped there and lived there for a while. But when autumn comes, it is impossible to fish in the liman because of big storms, worse than in the sea.

One brother said “Let’s go up the Amur, let’s find a quieter place”.

The other brother said “Why? I like it here, I will stay here”. He stayed to live among the Nivkhs and became a Nivkh.

The other brother went upstream and stayed in Dudi. They lived there well. A disease arrived, and almost the whole clan died out. One young woman survived. She sat and cried. One day she heard noise. She looked out of the window. Back in the day, the windows were covered with fish skin, and you would have to poke it with a knife and look through the hole to see what is outside. She looked through a hole to see what was making the noise.

³³ In another version, they were lured into the sky with saules by Enduri (creator). The saules ran up into the sky, and the brothers followed them.

Stories can change depending on who is telling them and to whom. In the past, stories could be told over multiple nights.

³⁴ Enlarged estuary.

There was a big wheel rolling. That was a huge catfish rolling, he³⁵ bit his own tail and was rolling over meadows, making noise. Bakh³⁶, he fell in the Amur, and he felt good in the Amur, he would dive and come out, creating waves. Terrified, the young woman hid under the blanket.

The catfish came out of the water, turned into a dragon and walked. He opened the door a little and said “Why did you hide? I know you are here.”

She peeked from under the blanket and asked “What do you want?”.

The beast replied “Marry me”.

She replied “No, you are so scary, you are a monster. Were you a human, I would, of course, marry you. I am all alone.”

He replied “What is the problem?”, flipped over and turned into a handsome young man. “And now would you marry me?”, he asked.

“Of course, you are such a strong, tall young man”.

They had a lot of children. They would go to the Amur, and would always have luck fishing. They would go to taiga, and would always have luck hunting. Of course, he is the Master.

The time came, he gathered his children. “It is time for me to go back to my world, and you live your life, you have become strong, you are fishermen, you already have your own families. Know that in the future you will always have luck, I will always be helping you. But remember to behave on the Amur, take only what you need, and you will always live in abundance.”

Thus, in the Ulchi tradition, there are many stories that teach about the consequences of greed and instil the value of ecological living based on the principle of self-limitation. The presence of these ideas in traditional stories indicates that there was a clear understanding of the consequences of greedy behaviour, that people cannot live in greed because it begets evil, and that the only right model of human survival is living in harmony with nature. The practice of self-limitation comes from the need to preserve and continue the clan line, but also from the understanding of the relationship existing with other beings. Therefore, it would be a major simplification to attribute these values to purely utilitarian reasons. Importantly, the idea of self-limitation originates not from a scarcity mentality. On the contrary, the abundance (*дупза*, *dirga*) of the natural world is recognised in the Ulchi worldview, rooted in the belief that everything that people might need exists in

³⁵ The story was told in Russian. Catfish (*com*) in Russian is masculine.

³⁶ A sound of falling in Russian (*бax*).

nature. This complex understanding of human life in the Ulchi tradition is very different from the dominant Western understanding, which sees human life in disconnection from nature, and even more so from the realm of Spirits.

Today, unfortunately, these traditional Ulchi values are being lost. Most people do not follow the *Нāн'и дороны*, the Ulchi laws, that aimed to sustain harmonious functioning of society on all levels (family, clan, community, in people's interactions with other beings) anymore. As one informant said, they are ceasing to be Ulchi. As a number of informants mentioned, previously people used to see spirit beings and other beings (for example, little people³⁷) all the time, however, today this is happening less and less often as people have been losing the connection with the spirit world that their ancestors maintained. The history of the Ulchi tradition as well as the loss of some of its key values under the pressures of the Soviet development agenda and today of capitalism shows the importance of connecting the beliefs with practice for ecological living, and how sustainable socioeconomic structures can collapse under the pressures of a bigger system. One interesting practice that the Ulchi used to follow, according to one informant, consists of the following: when a fox was caught, the hunter would come home and hang it upside down. Between its teeth, they would place a piece of dried chum salmon caviar and leave it hanging like this for a few days. This was a way to express respect and gratitude to the animal that was killed. Such practices of reciprocity and relating to another being might not be enough to challenge the growth-oriented capitalist system, but they can be an important way of developing more harmonious relationships with the world we are part of and cultivating the value of self-limitation. Further reflections on how this relates to economic practices and an ecological conception of the self are given in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In the Ulchi worldview, the concept *быву удэны*, the essence of being, offers a localised and ecological perspective on the question of meaningfulness. It suggests an understanding of the place of the human in the world that is connected to ecological thinking, and, simultaneously, both to a concrete place and to all of creation. Thus,

³⁷ Stories about little people exist in many cultures, including in the Ulchi culture [Udy, 2023] and the Cree culture [Jobin, 2023].

compared to Western philosophy, *бүгү үдэны* offers a very different framing of the question of life's meaning, a framing that is truly non-anthropocentric. As Van Ysslestyne [2018: 2] points out, the Ulchi laws of life, *Нāн'и дороны*, sought to cultivate in a person the values that would help them "be a 'proper human being' on earth". This included such virtues as modesty and kindness, but also "an economy of nature (not wasting anything)" [ibid.: 3].

I would like to wrap up this chapter with two quotes that encapsulate the Ulchi philosophy of life intertwined with the ecological values. The first one is words of Ulchi shaman Mikhail Duvan, shared with me by one informant, which reflect the humility that was traditionally ingrained in the Ulchi perception of the place of the human in this world: "Everything around us (land, sky, sun, mountains) are permanent phenomena, whereas we come and go. We are temporary. That is why we have to preserve our environment."

The second quote is an instruction given to Nadezhda Duvan, an Ulchi knowledge keeper, by her parents: "Never think that you are greater, stronger, or more powerful than Nature" [Van Ysslestyne, 2018: 5].

CHAPTER 5. Finding meaning and building relational economies

Our behaviour toward the land creates and co-creates who we are. The public discourses we engage in create and co-create who we are.

Shalene Jobin, *Upholding Indigenous Economic Relationships*

If you don't move with the land, the land will move you.

Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk*

This final chapter summarises the findings and analysis presented in the previous chapters, exploring the concepts related to the question of life's meaning based on the kincentric worldview that could enrich the degrowth critique of capitalism. First, I compare the framings of meaningfulness that can be found in the Western tradition with the framings informed by the kincentric worldview, particularly, from the Ulchi tradition (section 5.1). Then I analyse connections between the kincentric framings of meaningfulness and the way cultures relate to the land (section 5.2), framings of the self (section 5.3), conceptualisations of localism (section 5.4), economic theory and practice (section 5.5) and spirituality (section 5.6).

5.1 The lost meanings

Western thinkers have dedicated a lot of time and effort to reflecting on the topic of life's meaning, trying to find answers to questions about the purpose and meaning of human existence and proposing ways to make life meaningful [Klemke, & Cahn, 2008; Young, 2014]. The question of meaningfulness has become central to Western philosophical thought and is closely tied to narratives about human well-being and conceptions of a good life. As was discussed in Chapter 1, at the centre of these philosophical debates has been the figure of God — mainly the Christian understanding of God — a supernatural power that, depending on the philosophical stance, either exists or not and, as a result, either grants some sort of meaning to human life or does not. Some thinkers, for example, Nietzsche and Foucault, faced the death of God with a more positive outlook by recognising the freedom that it grants to create and define oneself by removing the

prescribed scenarios for human life [Young, 2014]. Others, on the contrary, saw in God's death a loss of all meanings and, as a result, a void that makes human life meaningless and purposeless and that cannot be filled in with anything else [ibid.]. All in all, whether a specific thinker believed in God's existence and God's plan for humans or not, the discussions about meaningful life in Western thought have, nonetheless, rotated around the question of God [Young, 2014; Metz, 2019]. As was outlined above, the Western God-centred narratives of meaningfulness tend to come together with teleological and linear true-world narratives that see human life through its progression towards an intended purpose [Young, 2014]. Even when the figure of God is denied, the idea of linear progression towards an indented (remote) better place remains present, eventually hiding the figure of Christian God under the guise of the god of economic development and growth, as in Marxism [ibid.] and modern capitalist narratives, or under the guise of the narratives of a personal purpose and growth as in modern psychological narratives on individualised meaning-creation.

Thus, Western thought on the topic has revolved around a certain set of narratives, among which for the purpose of the present reflection on the connection between meaningfulness narratives and economic thought and practice, it is worth highlighting a few points, as shown in Table 2 below. All these points are not necessarily present in all Western narratives about meaning (for example, as has been discussed, degrowth, although being a predominantly Western movement, challenges the teleological narrative), however, they do characterise the dominant conceptions of meaningfulness, including their manifestations in popular culture. These narratives are long-standing, persistent and adaptable. At the same time, however powerful the dominant Western narratives of meaningfulness are, they represent only one of the possible ways of understanding and narrating human life. This thesis offers a reflection on what can be learnt from the framings of meaningfulness that exist in Indigenous cultures, and particularly in the Ulchi culture, how these framings are woven into broader narratives about human life and can shape economic theory and practice. Similarly, if compared to the points characterising the dominant Western narratives of meaningfulness, drawing on literature and the information collected in conversations with members of the Ulchi community, it is possible to highlight a few key points related to the Indigenous narratives of meaningfulness as well, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. **Comparison of the narratives of meaningfulness in the dominant Western worldview and in the Indigenous worldview**³⁸

	<i>Western worldview</i>	<i>Indigenous worldview</i>
<i>Concepts</i>	Meaning of life, meaning in life	Meaning-from-the-land, <i>биву удэны</i>
<i>Central element</i>	God: the figure of God is central to meaningfulness narratives, even when obscured or denied.	Land: land understood in broad terms is central to all narratives, including narratives about human life and meaningfulness.
<i>Relationship with time</i>	Time-tied: meaningfulness is time-tied, teleological and linear, i.e., oriented into the future and, hence, delayed.	Not time-tied: meaningfulness is not conceptually attached to teleology or purposefulness, hence, is not time-tied.
<i>Relationship with the place</i>	Not land-based: locality is obscured and not accounted for; hence, the narratives of meaningfulness are delocalised.	Land-based: the land/place is central to the narratives of meaningfulness, as it is the source of all meanings.
<i>Conditionality</i>	Often conditional: the meaningfulness of one's life is often judged by the presence of a purpose and progression towards it; or, can be conditional on the existence of God or a soul. At the same time, it might not be seen as conditional (i.e., life is seen as a priori meaningful) in the narratives of the meaning of life as granted by God.	Unconditional: everything is meaningful, life is a priori meaningful ('the meaning of being is in being itself').

³⁸ This comparison is based on the concepts discussed in the present thesis and, hence, is not exclusive. Other concepts and framings of meaningfulness might exist in other Indigenous cultures.

<i>Place of the human</i>	Anthropocentric: narratives of meaningfulness are focused on human experience alone, whether as a source of meaning or as a receiver of meanings intended by a superpower. The meaningfulness of the life of non-human beings is often denied.	All-creation-focused: narratives relate to/explain human experience, but they commonly do not place it at the centre or in opposition to other beings. Instead, meanings in human life are understood through relationships with other beings, land, spirits, etc.
<i>Collective vs. individual</i>	Both collective and individual: there is a conflict between grand, collective narratives about the meaning of human life and the individual search for meaning in life, in the sense that the latter commonly comes with the denial of the former. However, narratives can be multi-layered combining both individual and collective aspects, for example, in the economic domain.	Relational: meaningfulness exists through relationality; relational is meaningful. The distinction between the collective and the individual is not made.
<i>Good vs. meaningful life</i>	Related: meaningfulness is seen as a prerequisite of a good life, as a result, the issue of meaninglessness is critical and problematised.	Unrelated: a good life is understood in different terms, not connected to the question of meaningfulness.

Brian Burkhardt [2019: 213] critiques the Western worldview for its “search for meaning or value in oneself or in isolation”, which implies a worldview that originates from delocality and is “floating free from the land”. Conversely, describing the Indigenous ways of being, Burkhardt [2019] uses the term ‘meaning-from-the-land’ to refer to the land as the source of all meanings, including meanings in human life. From this perspective, life is a priori full of meanings as they all originate from the land and all the relationships that constitute it, including relationships among humans, between humans and animals, among animals, between animals and plants, between winds and rocks, between spirit beings and water,

etc. In the Ulchi term *быву удэны*, human life is perceived this way as well — through concrete relationships that humans, as individuals and collectively, are part of. Recognising all the relationships that surround humans and make human life possible, among other things, implies recognising the fullness of life that these relationships constitute, and the richness of meanings that abound around us. In the kincentric worldview, every relationship matters, every life and every being matters, life itself matters. In such a way of being there can be no meaninglessness. Thus, it can be said that from the perspective of the kincentric worldview, the land itself gives answers to the question of life's meaning. Put otherwise, the kincentric worldview teaches us that everything matters, hence, life is a priori full of meanings. This way of perceiving life through all kinds of relationships helps shift the focus from 'there is no meaning' to 'everything has meaning'.

While a lot of Western literature on the topic of life's meaning [Young, 2014; Metz, 2019] has been dedicated to the question of God's existence and the loss of meaningfulness after 'God's death', it seems to be commonly overlooked in Western philosophy that in the Western world many meanings were lost (or rather obscured) prior to the general loss of Christian belief, i.e., when the belief in the sentience of all beings, the kincentric worldview, was lost. Cutting off of the human self from the relationality that composes life on Earth took away the 'original' meaningfulness of human existence, and as such can be seen as one of the sources of the crisis of meaningfulness that predates the post-Christian loss of meanings. Today, although pockets of kincentric belief can be found in many other contexts, including in the Western world, this worldview is mainly carried by Indigenous cultures. However, at some point, the kincentric worldview existed in all places and all cultures on Earth. Tyson Yunkaporta [2020: 95] uses the term 'original cultures of humanity', which highlights that the kincentric worldview and the relationality that it implies is 'original' to humanity and, at some point, was shared by all peoples. Looking at how this original worldview manifests in Indigenous knowledge systems, as well as at the remains of it in the Western cultures, can help find answers to the Western quest for meaning, which has been tainted by existential anguish and anxiety.

However, it is important to be aware of the fact that here we are using a Western philosophical question of meaningfulness and its Western framing in order to understand the kincentric worldview. If the starting point were the Indigenous worldview instead, it is unlikely that the question of meaning or of purpose would arise at all. This is confirmed

by the words of one of the informants from Bulava quoted in Chapter 4 who said that “the meaning of being is in being itself”. An interesting post reflecting this difference in terms of relating to meaning between the Western and the kincentric worldview was shared on Instagram by a person with the profile name @melatoninlau, which has been widely reposted throughout social media: “western cultures believe we must be alive for a purpose. to work, to make money. some indigenous cultures believe we’re alive just as nature is alive: to be here, to be beautiful & strange. we don’t need to achieve anything to be valid in our humanness”.³⁹

Therefore, looking at it from the perspective of the kincentric worldview, the question of meaning of/in human life loses the importance and conceptual power that have been attributed to it in Western thought. The kincentric worldview is an example of a different-from-Western way of being and perceiving life, including the question of the place of the human in the world, and as such it offers a window into a worldview where the question of meaningfulness does not really arise because being itself is full of meanings. In Western philosophy, there is a belief that the question of life’s meaning requires a certain level of intellectual sophistication and sensitivity. Thus, Klemke and Cahn [2008: 1] write: “Perhaps almost every sensitive and reflective person has had at least some moments when similar fears and questions have arisen in his or her life”. On the other hand, not raising the question has often been associated with ignorance. For example, a comparison of people questioning and not questioning the meaning of existence was offered by Leo Tolstoï [2008] in *My Confession*. In the piece, Tolstoï discusses why peasants would not have issues with the question of the meaning of life as opposed to him or other educated individuals who would get paralysed by the lack of clear answers to it. Tolstoï observed that peasants would naturally have an answer to this question and, hence, did not struggle with it. Similarly, it could be assumed that pre-industrial societies, including Indigenous communities, just would not have the time or capacity to reflect on such philosophical matters as the question of life’s meaning, because they were focused on surviving. However, as Yunkaporta [2020] points out, historically, Indigenous communities would spend fewer hours working than people in modern societies and actually had a lot of free time to enjoy. Therefore, it could be worth questioning instead whether these communities (or social groups, in the case of Tolstoï’s analysis) had the need to raise the question of life’s meaning at all. Perhaps this divide between those who

³⁹ The account is not available on Instagram anymore. The reshared post can be found at https://www.instagram.com/p/Cw6Vgh5Jgqq/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

raise the question of life's meaning and those who do not can shed light on the nature of the question itself as a 'trickster' question, using Brian Burkhardt's framing [2019], i.e., a false question that originates from the nature of the Western philosophical tradition itself, which seeks universal, abstract answers to universal, abstract questions and ends up creating "webs of confusion and illusion" [ibid.: xxxi]. Hence, is not the question itself a result of particular ontological and epistemological characteristics of the Western worldview?

Therefore, applying this question to look at Indigenous knowledge systems is a distortion in the sense that it applies a Western concept to a different worldview, and looks at the latter through its own ontological and epistemological lens. On the other hand, since this thesis is aiming to translate Indigenous knowledges for the purposes of expanding the boundaries of and decolonising Western environmental movements, particularly degrowth, this kind of translation seems to a degree inevitable. If we continue measuring the conceptual framework of the Western question of life's meaning against the kincentric worldview, we will see that theories and narratives about meaningfulness did and continue to exist in Indigenous cultures, however, they typically would not be framed as such. These narratives would not be focused on the question, there would be no room for a question, it would be a statement that "the meaning of being is in being itself" and that land itself is the source of meanings, meanings so rich that there is no need to search for any other meanings, as is the case in the Ulchi tradition.

What would embracing the philosophy of *быву удэны* and the meaning-from-the-land imply for Western environmentalism, including degrowth? In the next sections of this chapter, I will focus on the intersection of the land-based narratives of meaningfulness and more broadly about human life with ecological values and economic practices, which, in their turn, unavoidably extend into the domain of the spiritual.

5.2 Relating to the land

Environment, nature, non-human beings, more-than-humans, land, Mother Earth, Gaia — these are some of the terms that are used in English to describe the world that humans live in. These terms have different origins, are used differently, have different connotations and, importantly, also imply different ways of relating to the world. The term

'environment' originated in the Western scientific context, has a rather broad spectrum of uses depending on the discipline or in the colloquial sphere, and can be characterised by different levels of meaning (for example, the built environment versus the ecological environment versus the cosmic environment) [Weichhart, 1979]. While some authors have stressed that it implies a living unit (individual, social aggregate, etc.) and the world (or part of it) that remains outer to it [ibid.], in environmental literature 'environment' has been used as a relational concept, intended to challenge the dualism implied by the term 'nature' [Ingold, 2000; Morton, 2007; de Castro, 2015]. Thus, Tim Morton [2007] writes: "Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman". However, both terms, environment and nature, originate from the Western ontology.

Since language is a carrier of the worldview, it is useful to look at how the relationality with the rest of the world is described in English, or other Western languages, as opposed to Indigenous languages. Reed et al. [2024] conducted interviews with 17 Indigenous persons from Canada about nature-based solutions to the climate crisis. One of the interesting findings of the study was that most interviewed Experts shared that in their languages there is no word that could serve as a direct translation for 'nature'. If such translations were offered by the Experts (e.g., *aki* in Anishinaabemowin, or *Wsitqamu'k* in Mi'kmaw), they clarified that those were "a poor characterisation of the concept" as in an Indigenous sense there was no need to define 'nature' since "nature is just our place, our home, where we belong to" [ibid.]. The Experts suggested that the need to define nature emerges from the Western sense and it can be defined because what is defined as nature has been othered. The same applies to the term 'more-than-human', which, as Cecily Maller [2021: 5] points out, is useful for moving "past anthropocentric, colonial, and purely functionalist framings", however, would not be used in Indigenous languages. Instead, in an Indigenous context, non-human beings would rather be recognised as relatives.

Therefore, when Western environmental movements seek framings and terms to describe ways of relating to the world around us that would underpin more sustainable ways of being, it is important to be aware of the terms and concepts that are being invoked and the meanings that they carry with them. Such terms as 'more-than-human' can be helpful as the first step towards shifting the Western binary understandings of the place of the human in the world, however, it still does not fully represent the relationality that

the Indigenous worldview is rooted in. As was discussed in Chapter 3, translations of terms characterising the Indigenous worldview into English often fail to transmit the intended meanings due to the nature of the English language itself. Therefore, learning from the Indigenous worldview requires engaging with the underlying epistemology, as well as questioning the Western epistemology, not simply embracing such terms as ‘more-than-human’. One key concept that can help understand the kincentric worldview and the underlying relationality better is ‘land’.

In the book *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* [2020], Tyson Yunkaporta describes the meanings of the Australian Aboriginal flag (Figure 7) and how it can help understand the Aboriginal people’s ways of relating to the land. The flag was designed in 1970 by artist Harold Thomas, a Luritja man from central Australia and a member of the Stolen Generations. The flag became a symbol of Aboriginal Australia [AIATSIS, n.d.].



Figure 7. Australian Aboriginal flag.

Source: Wikipedia

Yunkaporta writes [2020: 66–67] that the flag “represents more than just black for the people, red for the land, and yellow for the Dreaming.”⁴⁰ It shows how the relationship between people and land is balanced perfectly by Laws, stories, and values of the Dreaming at the centre of two equal halves, so that the needs of the people are always in a sustainable balance with the needs of the land.” Yunkaporta goes on to say that “[i]n most contemporary systems, the red and the black are alarmingly out of balance, and the yellow at the centre seldom takes the shape of a circle. The Dreaming of our current growth-based economic system takes the form of a pyramid. Progressive approaches

⁴⁰ In other explanations of the colours used on the flag, the yellow circle is said to represent the sun [AIATSIS, n.d.].

may try to flip that pyramid upside down or cut off its top, but there is still only a thin strip of red land left at the bottom of the flag no matter where you sit on the political spectrum — every civilised system demands growth based on destruction of land”.

This flag is, thus, a symbol of the relationship existing between the Aboriginal people of Australia and the land they live on, and represents the importance and practice of maintaining a balance between the two parts. Yunakporta’s comment also highlights the neglect of the land in the Western worldview. Yunkaporta connects this neglect to the growth paradigm, however, Western movements such as degrowth, while challenging the pyramid-like, growth-oriented thinking, still have not managed to incorporate into their thinking the same way of relating and attributing importance to the land as is the case in the Indigenous worldview.

First of all, the word ‘land’ is not used in degrowth or other Western environmental literature in the same sense as in Indigenous literature. It is more common to use such terms as ‘environment’ and ‘nature’, both of which, as was discussed above carry the Western worldview in them and corresponding meanings about the place of the humans in the world. The general use of both terms in the environmental context also highlights another key characteristic of Western thinking that is pointed out by Indigenous thinkers — universalised and abstract thinking [Burkhart, 2019], as was discussed in Chapter 3. Thus, if compared with the kincentric understanding of the land, nature and environment in the Western sense are typically abstract concepts that describe those entities as universal, i.e., *all of nature* and *all of the environment*. Thus, when talking, for example, about re-establishing humans’ connection to nature, ensuring the right to access nature as a human right, or protecting the environment, these concepts are often used in a general sense, without touching on the relationships existing between specific communities and specific places, including all other beings making up those places. On the contrary, Indigenous authors [Deloria Jr., 2003; Burkhart, 2019] stress the importance of concrete being. Land-based being is always concrete and context-bound,⁴¹ i.e., takes place through concrete relationships with concrete beings, rocks, winds, other humans, spirits, etc. that make up a concrete location. In this sense, even if Western environmentalist framings of nature and the environment might challenge mainstream

⁴¹ The emphasis on context-specific, concrete being and thinking aims to point out a critical difference between the default epistemological approaches in the Western and the Indigenous worldview, and does not imply that concrete thinking does not exist in Western thought, or that abstract thinking does not exist in Indigenous thought.

economic thinking and the capitalist imaginary that reduces nature to an economic resource, they, nonetheless, tend to imply a certain disconnection between humans and nature/place, a lack of a recognition of the deep mutual dependence that humans and non-humans live in and a reduced accountability of humans towards other beings. Therefore, when looked at from the perspective of the kincentric worldview, the understanding of nature and the relationship of humans to it in Western environmentalist thought can be seen as rather reductive.

In the Ulchi language, there is the word *Hā*, which means land, Earth, the place where you live. If we compare the words ‘environment’ and ‘*Hā*’, we can hear in the Ulchi language such phrases as ‘we are the children of *Hā*’. Conversely, it is difficult to imagine someone say ‘we are the children of the environment’. These two words describe very different relationality with the world around us, which their use also codes back into the social imaginary and practices. From the perspective of the Indigenous worldview, land means the place that people would have an ongoing relationship with, the territory that people would know and that typically their ancestors knew and became part of, and that their descendants would also get to know.

Thus, land-based being, from the perspective of the kincentric worldview, means being connected to all of creation through being part of a concrete place. In this sense, land-based being does not suggest a limited perception of the world or a limited localised perspective. On the contrary, many Indigenous cultures have words and concepts reflecting the understandings and connections that extend far beyond the land the community would live on. Relating to land in a kincentric sense implies relating to all the beings and elements that constitute the place as well as relating through the place to other places and parts of creation, including space and planets. Thus, Shalene Jobin [2023: 113] shares the following words of a Cree Elder: “We are related to the stars over there, as farfetched as it may seem, that is what we are related to...”.

What the idea of being-from-the-land suggests instead is that in order to be part of all of creation — and to be in general — one needs to be rooted in a place. Indigenous thinkers [Yunkaporta, 2020] often argue that even in non-Indigenous contexts, Indigeneity, Indigenous knowledges and values are not non-existent, but rather only obscured, suggesting that elements of the kincentric worldview are carried by every culture and every person, although to a greater or lesser extent. While Indigenous cultures make

these relations between humans and the rest of creation explicit, putting them at the centre of their worldview, in other cultural contexts this kind of relationality may be obscured, as is the case in the Western dominant culture. However, this does not change the actual nature of our relationships with the world and other beings, which are intrinsically relationships of mutual dependence.

It is important that in the kincentric worldview the understanding of this interdependence is not limited to only environmental and economic dimensions. Hence, the understanding of the land from the perspective of the Indigenous worldview is not narrowly environmental or economic either, it is encompassing all ways of human and non-human interaction with and within the land, including spiritual, economic, ecological, social, non-human, political and other. In its turn, degrowth, through its grounding in ecological economics, recognises the existing interdependencies between the social, economic and environmental [D'Alisa et al., 2014]. From the degrowth perspective, economy is seen as part of society, which is, in its turn, part of the environment. This way of seeing economy and society is opposed to mainstream economic thinking that diminishes the importance of nature by reducing it to a resource. Similarly, the degrowth framing is also opposed to the three pillars of sustainable development framework that equalises the importance of society, economy and environment [UN, 1987]. Degrowth insists on the importance of recognising the materiality of the economy, i.e., that economic activities do not happen in a vacuum, but are always dependent on the resource input from nature [D'Alisa et al., 2014]. In this sense, the material and energy flow analysis that informs the degrowth critique of growth-oriented capitalism is getting closer to the Indigenous ways of seeing human societies and economics through relations and interdependencies.

However, looking from the perspective of the kincentric worldview, the material and energy analysis that degrowth and ecological economics offer is only one of the steps in restoring the relationship between humans and the rest of the world that could lead to sustainable ways of being. From the perspective of the Indigenous worldview, the recognition of the dependence of society and economy on material input can be seen as only the surface, the most visible aspect of land-based being, which is, however, always intertwined with a complex network of also non-material relations. Thus, relationality always extends beyond the resource and energy exchange and, among other kinds of relationships, also includes seeing other beings as relatives, for example, Father Sky, Mother Earth, Bear Spirit (who, for example, in the Ulchi tradition can be an ancestor,

husband, etc.), Tiger Spirit (who, for example, can be a teacher, protector, etc.). The kincentric worldview also implies taking account of the relationships that do not include humans as they exist also among other beings, including spirit beings. In many Indigenous traditions, including the Ulchi tradition, maintaining and revering all these relations is critical to maintaining balance of life on the planet. This kincentric ontology is denied or overlooked by Western environmentalism, including degrowth theory, even when Indigenous values, such as recognising the rights of non-human beings, are invoked.

Furthermore, the focus on social and economic dimensions in Western and degrowth environmentalism implies that the starting point in understanding the relationship with nature is still the human, human societies and human economies. The Indigenous knowledge systems show how to shift focus to the land itself and the relationships that land consists of, thus, it shows a way for moving away from the anthropocentric perspective on nature and the place of the human in the world. The understanding of the mutual interdependencies that all beings, including humans, live in leaves no place for anthropocentrism in the Indigenous worldview. Consequently, it also excludes the utilitarianism of valuing other beings and relations based purely on their role in human survival, which also has anthropocentric roots [Burkhart, 2019]. Yunkaporta [2020: 35] argues that “[t]he understanding that we are no greater or lesser than a rock would certainly change things if a critical mass of people all came to it at once”. The kincentric worldview, thus, also prevents misanthropic thinking, which, as Brian Burkhart [2019] argues, Western environmentalism is prone to. Burkhart suggests that misanthropy is the opposite side of Western anthropocentrism, the common denominator of both being the Western system of hierarchical valuation, where one has to be hierarchically above another in order to be attributed value. Burkhart argues that when Western anthropocentrism is challenged, such as in the case of Western environmentalism, and the importance of humans over other beings is denied, there remains the need to attribute secondary value to something else, and in Western environmentalism this role is taken over by humanity, resulting in misanthropy and denial of the value of human life. Yunkaporta’s words “no greater or lesser than a rock” [2020: 35] indicate the worldview where everything and everyone is equally important as every being is seen as a sentient being that carries value, without any hierarchies being attached to this value. Therefore, the kincentric worldview teaches how, through recognising interconnections we live

through, the place of the humans in the world can be reframed around the idea that all life is equally important.

While the Indigenous worldview can help shift the dominant ways of relating to nature and inform ways of restoring the relationship with the land, it is also important to be aware of the need for systemic changes and the inertia to such changes that the capitalist system poses. Shalene Jobin [2023] describes economic relationships as constituent, i.e., that economic practices that communities undertake shape them and their relationships with nature, other beings and also within communities. In her analysis of Cree economics, Jobin suggests that the capitalist practices brought by settlers have been changing the way people in her community have been relating to the land (which eventually also transforms relationships within the community, in particular, towards women, girls, and Two-Spirit+ persons), justifying its othering and exploitation, often in the name of the Nation's survival. Capitalism has been altering the relationship with the land for Indigenous Peoples around the world, but also for non-Indigenous communities, through changes in both values and practices, making closer ways of relating to the land and nature more and more difficult, thus, creating both physical and mental alienation [Jobin, 2023]. By destroying and poisoning nature, the economic exploitation that capitalist development depends on has been destroying the possibility for people around the world to maintain relationships with other beings, including relationships of nourishing (food), healing (medicine), teaching, learning and ceremony. Therefore, change in values and perspectives in terms of relating to nature/land should go hand in hand with systemic and institutional changes, however, without the former, the latter would not be possible at all. In this sense, degrowth makes an important effort in expanding the social imaginary to start realising the importance of factoring nature into our understandings of social and economic functioning. The kincentric worldview, in its turn, shows what a closer and truly non-anthropocentric way of relating to nature can look like and teaches the importance of a broader recognition of the network of interdependencies with the land that humans live in. Using Yunkaporta's words [2020: 2] quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the kincentric worldview reminds us that "[i]f you don't move with the land, the land will move you". In this sense, the kincentric worldview teaches humility, which, in its turn calls for a deep reconsideration of the dominant ideas of the self.

5.3 Ecological self

Shalene Jobin [2023: 204] argues that, just as much as capitalist economic activities, daily acts of resurgence and involvement in economic practices that are alternative to capitalism are also constitutive, i.e., “they create, re-create, and renew who we are as individuals and who we are as people”. These are “social, cultural, political, legal, and economic acts of self-determination” [ibid.], which “create different pathways forward” [ibid.] by changing us collectively and individually. Thus, different economic systems and practices, among other things, also imply different framings of the self. Consequently, systemic transformation in line with the degrowth vision also requires reconsidering the dominant understandings of the self, or, using Brian Burkhardt’s words [2019: 252], “finding the proper moral and ethical road upon which human beings should walk”. So, what can movements such as degrowth learn from Indigenous knowledge systems in terms of understanding and narrating the self?

Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022] suggest that the Indigenous worldview presupposes a particular ethic and understanding of what it means to be a human and what it means to live a good life, with the idea of ‘becoming human’ being central to it. Thus, in the Ulchi tradition, as Yan Van Ysslestyne [2018] describes it, *Hāhu ðopo*, the Ulchi law, which regulates all aspects of the Nation’s life, aims to educate members of the community how to be a proper human by teaching how to live in harmony with nature, with others and with oneself. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson [2016: 3] writes that the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg knowledge, education, economic and political systems “were designed to promote life”, their “way of living was designed to generate life — not just human life but the life of all living things”. The understanding of the self from the perspective of the kincentric worldview is, thus, shaped by this life-giving, life-honouring ethic [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. While in each culture this would manifest differently, the underlying principles are shared by many Indigenous cultures around the world. One of the elements of the understanding of human life from the kincentric perspective that is directly linked to this life-honouring ethic and that stands out clearly in contrast to the dominant Western take is what could be called *the ecological self*, i.e., the intrinsic understanding of human life through the lens of connections to the rest of creation, to nature and other beings. This ecological self can be contrasted with the dominant Western narratives about the self that obscure such connectedness.

As was mentioned in Chapter 4, one of the striking findings that emerged in conversations with members of the Ulchi community was that in response to the question about what it means to live a good life from the Ulchi perspective respondents referred to the ecological values of living in harmony with nature and not taking from nature more than what one needs. Therefore, in the Ulchi worldview, the understanding of human life in general and also the understanding of a good life is interwoven with the ecological values of maintaining the balance and harmony of life, and of self-limitation, which is both individual and collective. The ecological here is, thus, not disconnected from the individual or collective, and the self, cannot be imagined in disconnection from the rest of creation. Therefore, this kind of an ecological self is a relational self. Going back to the quote by Shawn Wilson [2008: 80] that was cited in Chapter 3, we are not merely “*in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of”. In this sense, the relationships that we are part of are constituent as they shape our individual and collective self. While in the dominant Western narratives of the self, this kind of relationality and interconnectedness with other beings is obscured, the kincentric worldview and its narratives of the self make it explicit. Furthermore, Darcia Narvaez in *Restoring the Kinship Worldview* [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022] discusses this way of understanding human life and the self as not only ecological and more natural, but also as a worldview that offers a much richer, more connected and harmonious life. Thus, Narvaez [ibid.: 227] writes: “The dominant culture makes us into numb and dumb robopaths instead of full, kincentric human beings coexisting connected and respectfully with a living earth”.

It is also worth comparing the perception of the self through the kincentric worldview with the image of the self that is put forward by degrowth. Degrowth challenges the dominant individualistic framing of the self in the capitalist imaginary, insisting on bringing back into focus community and society as important aspects of understanding human life, good life, meaningful life and the self [Kallis et al., 2014]. In this sense, the degrowth image of the self can be described as more humane and more communal. On the other hand, when comparing the ecological dimension of the socio-ecological critique that degrowth makes with the kincentric worldview underlying Indigenous knowledge systems, the former still stands out as rather anthropocentric and narrow as the focus is first of all placed on the well-being of human communities. On the contrary, instead of being understood as possessing its own agency, nature is rather seen as the background for human economic activities, although more sustainable ones than in the capitalist system. Thus, the

relationality that degrowth presupposes, while represents a significant advancement compared to the individualist capitalist imaginary, is, nonetheless, noticeably more limited than the relationality implied by the Indigenous worldview.

Narratives about human life and the self are also linked to and manifest in narratives about the role of humans in the world. For example, many Indigenous cultures have narratives about the role of the human in sustaining the relationships existing in nature as custodians or guardians [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. Thus, Yunkaporta [2020: 39] argues that “[c]reation is in a constant state of motion, and we must move with it as the custodial species or we will damage the system and doom ourselves”. This kind of role weaves human life into the life of other beings, instead of putting humans above them. Thus, Métis Elder Elmer Ghostkeeper [2007] explains that his community has historically seen itself as part of the land with all other living beings. Lyla June Johnston [2022] offers an analysis of a number of Indigenous food systems, including soil management, aquaculture and pyrogenic land management, that shows that the studied cultural groups “were and are active managers of local ecosystems”. Johnston [ibid.] writes that among those groups there is a shared understanding that “non-humans are the equal and sacred relatives of humans” and also that “human groups are divinely assigned to care for their respective homelands”. The idea of human responsibility towards the land also shows in the words of Ulchi shaman Mikhail Duvan that was quoted in Chapter 4 that “[e]verything around us (land, sky, sun, mountains) are permanent phenomena, whereas we come and go. We are temporary. That is why we have to preserve our environment.” As Johnston’s analysis [2022] shows, a good indicator of the successful completion of this role by humans is abundance, while the process is driven by the human knowledge of and familiarity with the non-humans and their needs. All in all, this responsibility towards the land is also intertwined with the responsibility towards the present and future generations of the community/family, which, once again, shows that the social and the environmental are not separated in this worldview, but are seen as parts of the same way of being.

Importantly, this kind of understanding of the role humans play in sustaining balance in the natural world and in relationship with other beings in many traditions implies not only organising economic activities in a certain way, but also sustaining this balance through ceremony. Thus, the fulfilment of this human role in creation encompasses both economic and spiritual dimensions (as well as others). Ceremony carried out by humans is seen as both life-sustaining, as it helps maintain relationships and balance among beings,

including between people and spirit beings, and also as pedagogy as it teaches people to maintain their role and their relationships with other beings and respect towards them on a daily basis [Wilson, 2008; Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. Thus, Four Arrows and Narvaez [2022: 15] write: “Being in tune with all this spiritual energy and entering into dialogue with it through praying, signing, vision questing, ceremony, and daily life is vital”. On a daily basis, these practices feed into the process of becoming human, as mentioned above, cultivating the self that can live in harmony with others, oneself and nature. Drawing on traditional Aboriginal stories, Yunkaporta [2020] talks about Emu’s problem, the destructive idea that one might have about being greater than others. In Aboriginal stories, “Emu is a troublemaker who brings into being the most destructive idea in existence: I am greater than you; you are less than me” [ibid.: 26]. This, Yunkaporta [2020: 26] argues, “is the source of all human misery”, and Aboriginal/Indigenous communities were “designed over thousands of years to deal with this problem”.

Therefore, the experiences of Indigenous communities around the world teach us the importance of putting values into practice on a daily basis and cultivating communal and ecological values, including through ceremony, economic practices and storywork [Archibald, 2008]. For example, in the Ulchi tradition, the principle of self-limitation would be taught through many traditional stories and would be lived by members of the community on a daily basis through both rituals and economic activities. Such an approach teaches ecological humility and the understanding of the self as dynamic and shaped on a daily basis by our practices. Furthermore, the experiences of Indigenous communities teach us the importance of relationships in shaping our identities.

One of the common concerns that arises when discussing how Westerners could learn from the Indigenous worldview is the concern about the imperfection of Indigenous communities, such as inequalities, practices of slavery, stories of ecological destruction, etc. As was mentioned earlier, some of the colonial narratives about the Indigenous peoples, particularly in the North-American context, include two extreme views on Indigenous Peoples as either dehumanised ‘savages’ or as idealised ‘Noble Savages’. However, both of these images, including the idealised one, have nothing to do with the actual lived reality of Indigenous communities, as Vine Deloria Jr. [2003] points out. No human community can be perfect, and Indigenous communities are no exception. This pursuit of perfection that can hinder learning from ‘imperfect’ Indigenous communities, as John Mohawk [2000] insisted, is characteristic of Western thought in general. Thus,

Mohawk [ibid., 2] wrote: “the history of ideas in the West is dominated by a certainty that an ideal world is possible, that such a world would be in the interest of all human beings, and its conception and production will inevitably be the product of Western thought.” This pursuit of an ‘ideal’ originates from the “resistance to the viscosity of the real” [Rowe, 2024]. Indigenous traditions, on the contrary, teach us how to face the imperfection of the real and work with it on a daily basis for the good of both humans and non-humans, or, using Donna Haraway’s term [2016], how to stay with the trouble. Thus, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson [2016: 20] writes that “Gzhwe Manidoo (The Creator, the one who loves us unconditionally) didn’t research about creating the world or think about creating the world. Gzhwe Manidoo created the world by struggling, failing, and by trying again and again in some of our stories”. Thus, the Indigenous traditions teach us to accept imperfection and dare try and fail, because “[m]istakes produce knowledge” [ibid.].

Therefore, what else can be learnt from the understanding of the self that emerges from the Indigenous worldview is the acceptance of humans and human life as imperfect and that creation of a better self and better communities is an ongoing process that needs to be contributed to on a daily basis. Accepting the imperfection of the Indigenous communities that Western ecological movements can learn from also implies accepting that a perfect system cannot be created and that humans are not perfect, therefore, it takes off the pressure to strive for a perfect future, and allows replacing it with the objective of creating a future that would be better than what exists today. Thus, the Indigenous knowledge systems can help system change projects, such as degrowth, lighten the burden of perfection and instead shift the focus to practice.

5.4 Spiritual environmentalism and spiritual localism

Indigenous thinkers point out that the relationship with the land, with the place, with all of creation in the Indigenous worldview is deeply spiritual [Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. What does this mean? As was discussed in Chapter 3, the Indigenous worldview extends beyond what Western science defines as animism. It recognises every being as sentient and alive, including beings that are not considered as such from the perspective of Western science, for example, rocks, winds and planets. However, Indigenous spirituality goes far beyond the term ‘animism’ — recognising that spirit is present in everything, Indigenous spirituality manifests in a complex, multi-layered and intertwined network of

relationships, including relationships of responsibility, that all these beings live through and *are* [Wilson, 2008]. Thus, a plant in this worldview is a sentient being, but it can also be a relative, grandfather, friend, teacher, knowledge keeper, etc. Or, in the Ulchi tradition, a bear is not just an animal, living being, source of meat, fur, medicine and other products that are valuable for sustaining the community. To some clans and individuals (for example, the taiga women, i.e., women who gave birth to twins, twins themselves and their siblings), bear is also a relative, *mana* (the ancient one), it is a Spirit that connects humans with other Spirits, beings and dimensions [Van Ysslestyne, 2018]. Moreover, it can be assumed that the ties that the Ulchi traditionally had with the bear are even deeper and more complex than what people from the culture can share with and/or explain to an outsider, or what can be described in a book.

Using Vine Deloria Jr.'s words [2003: xvi], in Indigenous traditions “the people used spiritual powers to live”. This could be understood through the lens of the dominant Western take as a superstition. However, from the perspective of the kincentric worldview, this kind of relational spirituality instead implies a recognition of the importance of the spiritual aspects of being, the dependence of human life on them and the importance of maintaining these relations in balance, including through particular spiritual practices and powers, in order to sustain life. In the Ulchi culture and other Indigenous cultures, that spiritual dimension of life is experienced as just as real as the material one. For many people from the Ulchi community that I had a chance to converse with, Spirits and other beings are part of their lived reality just as well as humans and animals. As was mentioned in Chapter 4, some of the informants reported that today for the Ulchi this connection with the spirit world and invisible realms (although sometimes they become visible) is being lost and such beings are encountered much more rarely. Nonetheless, their existence is not denied. Such spirit and non-spirit beings can be benevolent or harmful towards people [Van Ysselstyne, 2018], therefore, knowing them and how to interact with them in the Ulchi culture and many other Indigenous cultures is considered critical for sustaining the life of the community. As a result, there are many Indigenous stories that tell about spirit and non-human beings, and teach how to interact and maintain a relationship with them, with interesting parallels existing across cultures from different parts of the world. For example, Shalene Jobin [2023] in the book on Indigenous economic relationships writes that “the historical legends of the little people are lived realities for Cree people in the present day”. Similarly, in literature on the Ulchi culture there are accounts of encounters with little people, including by settlers who moved to the

Ulchi land in the 20th century [Udy, 2023]. This is only one example of such relations between humans and other beings being part of the lived reality of Indigenous communities, which are considered to be part of the symbiotic relations of life, and accounts of which are preserved in oral and written histories of different nations [Jobin, 2023].

However, this kind of accounts are typically not taken seriously by Western science, which has traditionally interpreted the kind of spiritual relationality that Ulchi and other Indigenous communities live in with their lands as a superstition originating from their 'mere' dependence on the world around them and inability to shape and manage the outer reality, unlike the Western cultures do through science and technology [Deloria Jr., 2003; Burkhart, 2019; Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022]. From this perspective, Indigenous spirituality can be seen as a way to explain what, according to Western science, Indigenous peoples did not have the capacity to understand, such as natural phenomena. Such a devaluing interpretation of Indigenous knowledge systems, including the knowledge of the land and its beings, which has been referred to as cognitive imperialism or cultural racism [Battiste, 2000], is rooted in the Western anthropocentrism that seeks to establish control over other beings and fails to recognise the complex interdependencies that humans live in as a natural part of existing on Earth. Therefore, the denial and devaluation of Indigenous, kincentric spirituality by Western science is also symptomatic of Western anthropocentrism, and, as such, is an important topic to consider for Western environmentalist movements and theories, including degrowth, that are seeking to find new values for a more sustainable and equitable future.

To compare the kincentric way of perceiving and being in the world with degrowth, it is worth going back to the survey of the degrowth community that Viviana Asara and I [Lopatina & Asara, forthcoming] conducted in 2023 and that was discussed in Chapter 2. Two findings from the survey that can help highlight some ontological differences are related to 1) the topic of connection to the place and 2) the topic of spirituality.

First, according to our findings, a rather low percentage of respondents believe that connection to a place is very important to living a good life. In the context of degrowth, this finding is very interesting given the great weight that degrowth theory attributes to localism [D'Alisa et al., 2014]. Further research could help better understand the degrowth narratives of localism, however, what this finding suggests is that the idea of living in

connection to a place does not hold a central place in the degrowth imaginary when compared to the other studied values (for example, satisfaction of basic needs, healthy ecology, etc.; see Figure 1). Drawing on this finding and comparing the degrowth imaginary with the Indigenous worldview, we can see that the localism that degrowth advocates for is primarily of economic nature, i.e., the focus is made, first of all, on relocalising economic activities for greater sustainability. This argument is critical to rethinking the economic system and making it more sustainable and equitable, however, looking at it through the critical lens of the kincentric worldview highlights the nonetheless anthropocentric nature of this kind of localism. The starting point of this kind of economic localism is still the human and human systems of production and consumption. Furthermore, as it fails to place the person in a concrete local context consisting of concrete relations as the kincentric worldview does, this kind of economic localism still remains transcendent in the sense that, while placing limits on economic practices, it fails to put limits on the individual in an ontological sense and to locate them within specific relations. Focusing on the economic dimension, it obscures the relationships that shape the place and the individual as part of that place. Thus, this kind of economic localism still implies a self that is transcendent. In this sense, while making an important contribution though the argument of economic localism, degrowth, nonetheless, reproduces the Western worldview that obscures the land and, hence, is delocalised or is “floating free from the land”, as Burkhart puts it [2019]. Although if looked at from the economic perspective and the perspective of energy and material flows, degrowth localism is localised, on the ontological level it remains delocalised and anthropocentric, because localism that is purely economic without grounding the person and community in relationships with other beings is still anthropocentric.

The second finding from the survey that is worth pointing out here is related to the question whether spiritual living is important to living a good life from both the degrowth perspective and the individual perspective of the respondents. The findings suggest that for the degrowth community and degrowth theory, the question of spirituality is not an easy one and there is a lot of disagreement on it. From the perspective of those who believe that spirituality is not important to living a good life and those who struggled to evaluate the importance of spirituality, it is worth reflecting on why the topic of spirituality is so disputed and what this can highlight in degrowth as a movement with Western roots and what it says about the degrowth environmentalism. On the other hand, from the perspective of those who agreed that it is important, it can be worth reflecting on what

spirituality means in the context of degrowth environmentalism and what kind of spirituality we are talking about, while comparing it with the relational spirituality that the Indigenous worldview is rooted in. Further research on the topic of spirituality within the degrowth community could shed more light on this issue and spur further debates within the movement.

Thus, the degrowth environmentalism and localism is very different from the environmentalism and localism informed by the kincentric worldview. The multidimensional relationality that makes up the Indigenous worldview, encompasses all dimensions of a community's life, including its economic practices, which are also always spiritual, in the sense that the spiritual dimension is woven into all other aspects of life, including the economy [Jobin, 2023]. Thus, economic theory and practice in the Indigenous worldview is spiritual. This way of spiritual living and integrating spirituality with economic practices and theory implies a specific type of relating to the world, which could be described as *spiritual environmentalism* and *spiritual localism*. These two terms are, of course, not Indigenous concepts and originate from the Western perspective that is trying to understand the Indigenous worldview. However, they can be useful for identifying the gaps existing in Western environmentalism and specifically for highlighting differences between the Western/dominant and Indigenous/kincentric worldview, and the ecological values that originate from both.

Brian Burkhart [2019: 186] writes: "Recognising that the ideals of the Western (delocalised) discipline of ecology are not the ideals of Indigenous locality is the first step in marking off the fact of colonial difference as it regards ecology". Looking at Western environmentalism through the lens of spiritual environmentalism and spiritual localism rooted in the kincentric worldview can help highlight paths for overcoming the anthropocentric legacy of modernity that is underlying it. While spirituality is often overlooked by Western environmental thought, including degrowth, could it be that this way a key element of understanding the world and the "original" [Yunkaporta, 2020] wisdom about how to relate to the world, live sustainably and organise our societies and economies is being missed out?

5.5 Relational economy

Degrowth theory insists that how we think about the socio-economic system matters, because economic narratives shape economic practices by justifying some practices, including those that are based on exploitation and lead to ecological degradation, while simultaneously rendering other practices unacceptable, unpopular or less likely to be implemented. For example, if there is a collective or dominant belief that the economy is more important than society, or can exist as a realm separate from society, or that economic growth is more important than social well-being, economic practices and policies will be a reflection of such beliefs. Therefore, what is included and excluded from the economic thinking does matter. Degrowth calls for refocusing economic thinking and practice on society and collective well-being, while placing economic practices within the ecological limits [D'Alisa et al., 2014; Kallis, 2019]. When this way degrowth brings into thinking about the economy the topics of social justice and ecological sustainability, it not only changes the narratives (i.e., decolonises the imaginary), but through this process can also shape future economic debates, decisions and practices. Similarly, the dimensions and topics that are not included, i.e., are omitted, in degrowth theory can have practical implications for the future of the economic system and the degrowth project of unmaking growth-oriented capitalism. For this reason, it is, for example, of critical importance that feminist degrowth scholars made the topic of gender explicit within degrowth theory [Dengler & Saave-Harnack, 2019].

When degrowth theory is compared with the Indigenous kincentric worldview, and more specifically when the degrowth narratives about economy are compared with the Indigenous approaches to economic thinking, as, for example, it is described by Shalene Jobin [2023], it is possible to see what is omitted in degrowth theory and what topics are prioritised over others. Through such a comparison, it becomes obvious, as has been discussed throughout this thesis, that the environmentalism of degrowth omits certain aspects and primarily does not account for the relationships with the land and non-human beings that Indigenous economic thinking — and thinking more broadly — is rooted in. The take on economy informed by the kincentric worldview is deeply relational as it is rooted in the understanding of mutual interdependencies that connect all beings. Therefore, the economy in the Indigenous worldview is relational, and economic relationships are not just economic, they are also family relationships, relationships of stewardship, learning and teaching, sustaining, flourishing, praying, gratitude and many other things.

In Shalene Jobin's [2023: 82] words, "Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land is more expansive than simply an economic question". In her analysis of Cree economic relationships, Jobin [2023] gives an overview of the guiding principles for rebuilding harmonious economic relationships rooted in the Cree knowledge system of relating to the land. These principles include:

1. pimâcihowin: the ability to make a good living;
2. kiskinowâpamiwewin: learning through observation;
3. mâmawi-h-itêyihtamowin: thinking about all;
4. manâtsiwin: civility and showing respect to all creation;
5. nâcinehikewin: protocol and proper procedures;
6. emekinawet: gift-giving;
7. kahkiyaw kâwâhkôhtowak: we are all relatives

The first two principles refer to the responsibility to provide for oneself, one's family and one's community, which, among other things, requires the ability to be adaptable and learn, while remaining connected to the land. The other five principles describe what relationality according to the Cree worldview means. The third principle stipulates that "[t]he collective needs to be considered, and this can come in the form of obligation" [Jobin, 2023: 159], including the principle of taking care of the vulnerable. The fourth principle extends respect to all creation and teaches the importance of protecting non-human beings, not overusing resources, taking only as much as one needs and using resources properly. For example, one of the ways to show respect to a killed animal is trying to use all its parts in order to avoid waste. The fifth principle teaches the importance of following protocol and procedures in order to maintain *good* relationships, which also includes the sixth principle, gift-giving. One of the important forms of gift-giving is offering tobacco to Mother Earth when collecting medicines, plants and other items from the Earth. Thus, Sylvia McAdam [2009] explains that the purpose of such an offering is to show gratitude. "[Mother Earth] must understand that you comprehend your relationship to her and that you know what she is giving you is one of the parts of her body. Through honouring and understanding the relationship to Mother Earth, you also honour and understand your reciprocal relationship to all of life and creation" [ibid.: 17].

These principles outlined by Shalene Jobin offer an example of concrete economic thinking based on the principle of relationality and its translation into practice. The Cree

perspective on economic relationships, as summarised by Jobin, is rooted in the understanding of an inherent interdependence among all beings, which includes chemical, biological, physical and spiritual relations. In practice, this relatedness translates into acts of reciprocity,⁴² which ensure that the relationships are maintained and remain good. Central to this worldview is the idea of self-limitation and respect of the natural law, which, if transgressed throws all off-balance. In its turn, the understanding of how to fulfil one's economic relationships and responsibilities to the land is taught and learnt, including through legends. When compared to the teachings shared by Ulchi knowledge keepers, as discussed in Chapter 4, it is possible to see many parallels in the ways Cree and Ulchi societies traditionally practiced, revered and maintained their economic relationships. When talking about this kind of relational economy, maintaining the connection to the land appears central to it. Studying teachings from Cree Elders, Leona Makokis [2009: 126] concludes that “[i]f one is not connected to the land, it is simpler to continue abusing the land for its resources”. In Shalene Jobin's words [2023: 182–183], we have “to reimagine our economies today in ways that reconnect and uphold our relationships to all beings”. Therefore, the key and fundamental teaching that the Indigenous knowledges about the economy, including the Ulchi, the Cree and other nations, offer is the importance and urgent need **to restore, renew and maintain good relationships with the land, each other and ourselves.**

Degrowth theory already does important work in terms of stressing the importance, analysing and putting into practice the task of restoring our relationships with each other, emphasising such values as conviviality and care [D'Alisa et al., 2014]. Could degrowth also embrace the kincentric worldview and relational economy, and incorporate relating to the land as a living being into its theory of systemic transformation towards a better, more equitable and more sustainable economic system? It is possible to assume, that if degrowth learns from the Indigenous worldview and seeks to build bridges with it, this will require significant transformations within degrowth theory, including critical reflections on its ontological and epistemological foundations. Among other things, this could require reconsidering the narratives about human life, good life and meaningful life that degrowth relies on, the narratives about the place of the human in the world, relationships with other beings, and the value that is attributed to other beings (as was discussed in Chapter 2).

⁴² Although Shalene Jobin points out that the Cree understanding of reciprocity can differ from the way the concept is understood in the English language. Thus, Jobin [2023: 178] writes: “When examining the idea of reciprocity for Cree people, the term does not always relate well, as an equal exchange does not always occur — there is not necessarily ‘sameness’ in value or ‘rights’”.

It could also require addressing the question of spirituality and of its place in the Western world, including the degrowth movement. If, on the other hand, degrowth finds it difficult to embrace the kincentric worldview that places relations and all of creation at the centre of thinking, including thinking about economic relations and the self, this could highlight the (potentially insurmountable) biases existing in degrowth thinking and the Western mind. Therefore, for Western environmentalism, including degrowth environmentalism, the kincentric worldview offers a mirror to look at itself critically and a reality check for the efforts of the degrowth movement at decoloniality.

Beyond offering a foundation for changing the dominant way of thinking towards a truly non-anthropocentric framework (i.e., decolonising the imaginary), the Indigenous knowledge systems also offer important teachings on how to put this kind of thinking into practice. The experiences of Indigenous communities teach that theory (values) and practice, including economic practice, are intertwined, one feeding into the other: without the right values, there can be no right practices; whereas without the right practices the values do not manifest. Furthermore, they teach us that all dimensions of human life are interrelated, that, for example, spiritual can also be economic and economic can also be spiritual [Jobin, 2023]. They teach the importance of putting ecological and relational values into practice and fulfilling our responsibilities towards the land on a daily basis (including through ceremony), thus, emphasising that this relationship is to be continuously renewed. Renewing it is particularly needed today, under the capitalist system that alienates people from the land, each other and also from themselves. Finally, the Indigenous knowledge systems teach that ecological values are to be cultivated and maintained, also through everyday practices. Thus, Maria Campbell [quoted in Jobin, 2023] writes that stories, songs, ceremonies and dances “taught [people] from birth to death [their] responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to [people].”

Maria Campbell [quoted in Jobin, 2023] tells a story of an Elder who compared colonialism with a scattered puzzle, where everyone lives with these fractured pieces and relations, and we all have to play our part to rebuild this puzzle by creating new relations and fixing the broken ones. Jobin [ibid.: 201] argues that the practices of renewing relationships with the land and non-human beings “provide a healing antidote to colonial dissonance”. Jobin’s analysis is mainly targeted at Indigenous Peoples and aims to help Indigenous

communities find ways to reconnect with their tradition and knowledge and to thrive outside of the colonial and growth-oriented capitalist system. However, the healing effect of reconnecting with the land also extends to non-Indigenous people, including Westerners, who are seeking to find ways of living beyond capitalism. Thus, practices of renewing our relationships with the land and non-human beings are intrinsically anti-capitalist as they defy the alienation that capitalism depends on and help us go back from living *off* the land to living *with* the land, using Elmer Ghostkeeper's terms [2007]. As such, our relationship with the land should be seen as of critical importance for movements such as degrowth, and reminds degrowth about the importance of considering which relations are to be revered and maintained, i.e., of not limiting the relational principle to human society.

5.6 Radical spirituality

James Rowe [2024] in *Radical Mindfulness: Why Transforming Fear of Death is Politically Vital* talks about practices aimed at developing mindfulness as an important element of radical political change. In the book, Rowe traces social inequality to the drive for dominance as a compensatory strategy of the human psyche to the existential fear of the finitude of life. Practices that teach people how to mitigate this existential fear can help lay the foundation for a healthier and more equitable society. In this sense, mindfulness can be a tool of radical politics. So can spirituality. The narratives that we create and stick to in regards to human life, the place of the human in the world and relationships with the land and other beings is not only a philosophical or ecological matter, but also political, and economic, as was discussed in the previous sections. The choice to recognise non-human beings and the land as sentient and alive is also a political choice as it defines how we interact with other beings, how our activities, including economic practices, impact their lives and what kind of responsibilities towards them we take on. Similarly, the choice to include into or exclude from the circle of sentience certain beings (for example, rocks) is also a political choice, the same as the choice to attribute to non-human beings value that is equal, lesser or greater than the value of humans. Therefore, spirituality constitutes a political issue.

As was discussed above, within a movement such as degrowth, and from the Western perspective more broadly, spirituality (defined based on the principle of kincentrism) can

be an important topic in the project of unmaking capitalism. However, it is essential to make sure that spirituality does not become a tool of false solutions and token change, or be co-opted by the capitalist system by analogy with McMindfulness [Purser, 2019]. As was mentioned earlier, Vine Deloria Jr. [2003] critiqued the Westerners who come in touch with the Indigenous knowledge for embracing only the elements of it that are easier to implement and do not necessarily require deeper changes in their lives, such as doing smudging or using dream catchers. Following the path of radical spirituality would require deeper and more attentive learning from the Indigenous knowledge systems, understanding them on a more profound level and the relationships and responsibilities that they imply, collectively deliberating on how these learnings can be implemented in today's societies. Therefore, radical spirituality should be an important step in the project of creating more sustainable and just economic systems. It can lay the ground for renewing and rebuilding good relationships with the land and non-human beings by helping see (i.e., taking them out of the sphere of that what is obscured) the relationships that need to be rebuilt and mended. However, it has to be followed by fundamental changes in practices as well. Taking the task of learning from the kincentric worldview and the spirituality it is rooted in seriously would imply significant transformations in the Western lifestyle. Therefore, it is important that if spirituality is to become a tool of radical change it should not be taken lightly.

As Shalene Jobin [2023] insists, changing our relationship to the land and other beings unavoidably changes us as well. One of the consequences could be a different way of thinking about meaningful living. What the Indigenous worldview teaches us in this sense is that a good life and a meaningful life is not possible without relationships. Degrowth points in the same direction when it insists on the importance of communal living and collective meaning creation [Kallis et al., 2014], i.e., degrowth suggests that meaningfulness is linked to relationality and, thus, challenges the views on meaningful life as an individual endeavour. However, from the perspective of the kincentric worldview and land-based being, this relationality should be extended far beyond the sphere of human relations to account for all relations and bring back into focus the core of all creation, the land, and life itself as the source of meaningfulness. Localism rooted in radical spirituality and translating into a relational economy that continuously renews relationships with the land and other beings can help find solutions to the Western quest for meaning, while challenging the capitalism-dependent ways of meaning-creation,

particularly, consumerism, and offering an alternative way of being that is rooted in all-encompassing relationality.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this research project was to explore connections existing between framings of meaningfulness and the economic domain, specifically, how the former affects the latter and vice versa. The idea for this research project originates from my work with the degrowth community and its aspirations to challenge the mainstream economic thinking that disconnects the economic from both the social and the environmental. Ultimately, with this analysis I am hoping to contribute to the efforts of the degrowth community related to the task of decolonising the social imaginary. The topic of meaningfulness, as one of the central topics in Western philosophy and culture more broadly, has offered ample ground for such reflections.

First, in this thesis, I looked at the dominant narratives that can be singled out in the Western debates on the question of life's meaning and how they are linked to the economic theory and practice of capitalism. Drawing on literature, I discussed how ancient teleological narratives, which can be traced back at least to classical Greek philosophy (although the connections to the idea of salvation in the religion of Ancient Egypt could also be explored further), over time transformed into the Christian idea of salvation and eventually morphed into narratives of economic growth and development. Most Western thinkers today insist that, with the death of God, the teleological narrative, both in its philosophical and Christian framing, lost its conceptual power, and they deny it as outdated. Its economic reinterpretation, which is, for example, present in Marxism, has been critiqued on the same grounds. However, despite this critique, the teleological narrative still persists in the idea of economic growth and development, making an essential part of the capitalist imaginary. Simultaneously, the growth-oriented capitalist economic system also relies on and benefits from the individualised framings of meaningfulness that emerged as a response to the denial of the grand narratives based on religious belief and that suggest that meaning is to be created by an individual themselves.

In the second chapter, I explored how degrowth as a critical socio-ecological movement, theoretical framework and a utopian political project challenges these narratives of meaningfulness and individualised practices of meaning-creation that underpin capitalism through such ideas and values as care, conviviality and *dépense*. Narratives of meaningfulness are closely related to the narratives of well-being and the understandings

of what it means to live a good life. I explored this connection in degrowth literature, and expanded the analysis based on the findings of a survey on the narratives of a good life existing in the degrowth community. The findings of the survey point to the importance of the topic of meaningfulness to the degrowth narratives of a good life and a socio-ecological focus of those narratives, but also to a problematic relationship with the topic of spirituality and low importance attributed to the relationship with the land. These findings can help highlight further avenues for theorising the concepts of a good life and meaningfulness, as well as for decolonial work within the degrowth movement.

The third chapter looked at the Indigenous worldview as a way of thinking and being that is rooted in relationality with both human and non-human beings, and explored some differences between the Indigenous and the Western worldview that have been problematised by Indigenous authors. At the centre of this kincentric worldview lies the land understood in broad terms as a concrete place comprised of the land, water, plants, animals, the spiritual world and all other beings, processes and relationships that form it. The concepts of being-from-the-land, knowing-from-the-land and meaning-from-the-land that were proposed by Brian Burkhart highlight how all aspects of human and non-human life are shaped by locality, by the place. This also applies to the topic of meaningfulness.

In chapter four, I explored how this land-based conceptualisation of meaningfulness manifests in the culture of the Ulchi, an Indigenous Nation from the Far East of Russia. Conversations with members of the community showed that the concept that is the closest to the English term 'the meaning of life' is *беву удэны* (*bevu udeny*), which can be translated as the 'essence of life', 'essence of being'. This essence of being, from the Ulchi perspective, is always concrete, it is connected to a place. Life itself and all the meanings that it comprises arise from the place and the relationships between the people, the place and all other beings. Thus, the narrative of meaningfulness in the Ulchi tradition is intrinsically ecological. As such, it is closely linked to the idea of self-limitation, which, in its turn, is placed at the centre of the understanding of what it means to live a good life from the perspective of the Ulchi worldview.

Drawing on the analysis presented in the first four chapters, in the final chapter I summarised some key differences between the narratives of meaningfulness in the Western and the kincentric worldview based on the following parameters: the key concepts used, central element, relationship with time and place, conditionality of

meaningfulness, place of the human in those narratives, collective versus individual framings, and the relationship with the concept of a good life. The comparison is not exhaustive as it is primarily based on the dominant narratives present in Western thought, on the one hand, and the literature and the Ulchi culture studied in this research project, on the other hand. Therefore, other aspects of the narratives of meaningfulness might exist. However, the present analysis helps highlight some of the important differences existing between the two worldviews and see how the kincentric framings of meaningfulness are connected to the way cultures relate to the land, and conceptualise the self, localism, economic theory and practice, and spirituality.

Thus, in this thesis, I sought to explore the search for meaning in Western societies, connect the existing narratives of meaningfulness to the economic and ecological realms as well as to look into the meanings that were lost in Western cultures through the replacement of the kincentric worldview with a teleological worldview. My hope is that seeing beyond the spectrum of options that Western thought offers on the question of life's meaning can help the Western environmental movements, including degrowth, that are seeking to create a better future beyond capitalist growth and exploitation see that the options in terms of thinking about meaningfulness are much broader than it might seem from the positionality of Western life. The world is much more diverse than what capitalism teaches us is possible. And the very popular quote by Frederic Jameson that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" only reinforces the capitalist imaginary and the idea of the lack of alternatives. On the other hand, engaging with other worldviews and with other knowledge systems can strengthen degrowth strategies and open up new avenues for creating a good and meaningful life for all. Thus, learning from the Indigenous worldview, can help find answers to the Western search for meaning and also give hope, which, as was also shown in the survey is a big challenge for the degrowth community.

This PhD project was an exciting journey that gave me an opportunity to connect with and learn from so many wonderful human and non-human beings from various parts of the planet. One of them was Sara Santana, whom I met during my second research stay in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Sara comes from the Cardinal and Quinn family, her grandmother is Elder Betty Letendre and her family are the direct descendants of Chief Papaschase. Her family is Cree Métis, from Treaty 6 area, and their traditional territory is River Side/Mill Woods area in Edmonton, Alberta. In Victoria, Sara runs a studio where

one can find Indigenous jewellery, art, medicine and other meaningful things. The studio also serves as a trading post, where one can trade art and craft supplies. So, right there, in downtown Victoria, in the centre of a capitalist city, in her studio, Sara challenges the capitalist logic by offering space for trading and reviving the traditional Indigenous economic practice of barter. In our first encounter, Sara said the following beautiful words: “The ceremony is taking place even if you don’t see it. The river, birds, animals are doing the ceremony, we just need to observe it”. We can choose to see that the ceremony of life on Earth is always taking place and to take an active part in it, reviving and maintaining our sacred relationships with other beings. Or, we can choose to keep ignoring it. Inspired by works of many Indigenous authors, in this thesis, I sought to show that this choice has implications for the world we live in and for us as humans, while also potentially helping find answers to the question that has tormented Western minds for centuries.

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