

THE LIMITS TO INTERVENTION**

Abstract. The book entitled “The Limits of Growth” was published almost 40 years ago (in 1972). The key thesis it proposed, i.e. that there are natural limits to social development, is directly opposite to contemporary views claiming that economic expansion can pull us out from the current crisis. This contradiction is a sign that there are certain limits on what we can do, even when we know what should be done and how it should be done. Drawing on Mlinar’s research into the spatial and temporal organisation of dwelling and living, examples from Yugoslav history and Giddens’ discussion of the EU’s constitutive difficulties, this article interprets the limits of rational intervention. Despite many difficulties, the situation has been improving recently. New structures have emerged that organise conflicts and hence prevent their escalation, but these successful examples should not be over-estimated. Conflict may take on a form that appears completely unacceptable, and in certain circumstances it may turn into a global problem. Human society can no longer be described in terms of co-operation (Durkheim) or conflict (Marx). The concepts that ignore the evolution of life as a whole when exploring human actions have become unsatisfactory. The social sciences therefore need to look beyond their (social) borders.

Key words: *limits of growth, intervention, co-operation, conflict, the social sciences, new paradigms*

It was almost 40 years ago that Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Juergen Randers and William W. Behrens published “The Limits to Growth” (1972). In that book they argue that, given the rate of population growth and the rate of economic expansion, humanity is approaching the limits of any further increase. To my knowledge, nobody has disproved the arguments of that book.

* Academician Eugen Pusić, PhD, professor emeritus University of Zagreb.

** Pregledni znanstveni članek.

Today, the world is in a global economic recession. A crisis is defined as an interruption of economic growth. The way out of a crisis is generally seen as a return to growth; the resumption of worldwide economic expansion. The traditional outlook on growth as the principal way out of economic and other problems has apparently not changed.

This contradiction calls for an explanation. The human species specialises in cause-effect thinking and owes its survival and proliferation mainly to that specialisation. Why has thinking about the limits to growth, an outstanding example of imaginative cause-effect thinking, apparently hardly made a dent in the traditional opposite assumption that the way to happiness is further growth? Why have we done so little in response to the predicament described in the "Limits to Growth"? It seems that, besides limits to growth, there are some sorts of *limits to intervention*, some deep-set tendencies, as well as some situational and structural logic that inhibit, quite generally, an appropriate reaction to rationally irrefutable arguments about our condition.

I shall argue in this article that the limits to intervention – just like the basic patterns of human interaction themselves – are a consequence of the inherited initial conditions and the changing boundary conditions of human behaviour, conditions that are inherently antithetic to a perspective of limited possibilities and, therefore, make it difficult to adopt an attitude of fundamental existential modesty and austerity.¹

In the course of evolution the roles of predator and prey became so general that they were internalised in the genetic heritage of animals as a behaviour pattern of fight-or-flight, of greed, possessiveness, as aggression and response to aggression. The opposite tendency towards mutuality and co-operation has its roots in the limbic system that developed in mammals as an emotion of tenderness towards their offspring, the young. This co-operative emotion gave mammals a clear evolutionary advantage by motivating them to protect their young and so bring more of them to the age of reproduction. All of this happened long before the species *homo sapiens* had differentiated from primates, but it seems to be a stable part of our genetic heritage. Co-operation and conflict are basic, though opposite, tendencies of human behaviour. They are the *initial conditions* of all forms of human interaction, all thinking and acting of people towards each other. With the evolution of consciousness, the interrelations between co-operation and conflict are becoming increasingly complex. There is co-operation and conflict within human groups that are in conflict with other human groups and

¹ *The theme of the initial and boundary conditions of human behaviour is set out in my articles "Teorijski okvir, implikacije, primjena" and "The State of the Social Sciences" (Rad Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti, Vol. 2008 and Vol. 2009).*

also trying to co-operate with them. Conflict develops out of co-operation as the interests of the co-operating individuals diverge, as their views about any aspect of their co-operation differentiate, or because they simply irritate each other while co-operating. In some instances, conflict can be combined with co-operation, as in competitive games. But, as forms of behaviour, co-operation and conflict are not symmetrical. Though emotions are present in both, the feelings of enmity produced by conflict are more intensive with a tendency to escalate not only beyond the original source of the clash but to a level where none of the parties to the conflict themselves can any longer control its course and the conflagration is left to burn out to the exhaustion of its human fuel.

This from-the-outset unstable relationship between co-operation and conflict in human interaction is made even less foreseeable by its *boundary conditions* setting, as it were, lateral limits to its course. The boundary conditions are exogenous, generated by the natural and social environment of the actors, as well as endogenous, produced by the minds of the actors, both rational and non-rational. Boundary conditions may change in sudden and unexpected events like natural catastrophes or human irrationality with large-scale consequences. They may be altered from causes that, although known, move in an exponential course. Thus, when the curve of their development has reached a sufficiently steep incline, there is very little time left for any kind of response, as in the example of a population increase. Alternatively, changes that affect the natural environment, such as climate change, may move to a tipping point. When this point is reached, there are so many simultaneous consequences – e.g. the burning of tropical forests, cultivated and cultivable land turned into desert, a worldwide increase in sea levels – that to react to all of them adequately at the same time may well be beyond our abilities.

An example of changing boundary conditions in the social environment is offered by the economy. In the light of our historical experience it is difficult to imagine an economic system that has reached a certain level of development and does not rely on individual initiative and on the stimulus of competition in the market in order to obtain more and better products at a lower cost. The system of market competition was first criticised because of its side effects. Some participants in the market were more successful than others and were able to accumulate sufficient money to acquire means of production as their ownership, means on which other people depended by working for a wage. This produced a secondary conflict between the owners of the means of production and the workers, a positional conflict only indirectly related to the original competition in the market. This, in turn, led to different alternative arrangements whose common denominator was the attempt to redress the balance in favour of the workers through the

intervention of public political power. While extreme solutions of transferring the means of production to public ownership soon showed their inability to function as expected as well as their pernicious political side effects, the whole problem shifted to a different level. The process of the concentration of wealth turned from the accumulation of the means of production meant to produce goods for the market to the accumulation of money meant to produce more money by financial transactions. At the top of the economic system a financial superstructure developed using money to acquire money, but at the same time able to financially control the producers of goods and services. The competition in the financial superstructure, the banks and stock exchanges, did not stimulate anybody to produce better and cheaper goods. More than the system of market competition by producers and made systemically legitimate, it brought to the surface an aggressive predatory greed that was anyway a standard part of our genetic heritage. The risk of speculation in the financial superstructure for the economy as a whole has been obvious since the beginning of the present worldwide crisis. But what should be done, by whom and how to tackle this essentially new situation is today far from clear.²

At the other extreme, just one example of the sometimes surprising and wholly disproportional effect of endogenous boundary conditions is the role of one individual, Saint Paul, in the early Christian church. The first intellectual to join the new creed taught by Jesus Christ, Saint Paul was moved by intensive feelings of indignation that Israel, representing a monotheistic religion thousands of years old, could have been defeated and almost destroyed by the Romans, religious primitives still living in a kind of jovial polytheism. He interpreted the new creed as the New Testament, a continuation of the Old Testament, the Jewish religion of Jehovah. And he saw the revenge for the Roman conquest in the end of the world, that he expected to come about during his, Paul's, lifetime, and the Judgement Day when the Jews would be vindicated as the worshippers of the True God and the Romans damned eternally as heathen. His expectation was not fulfilled. But his organising talent let him stabilise the foundations of one of the most lasting institutions in human history. As Christianity spread it destroyed the

² *In the Guardian Weekly (19-25 June 2009), the journalist Will Hutton interviews the Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman about the current economic crisis. The last question asked, naturally, what Krugman would suggest should be done? The answer, short and to the point, was: "Financial regulation. Chain the monster". Barely two weeks later, 3-9 July 2009, the same newspaper ran the heading "Banking behemoths get back on the gravy train" brings the following information: "Barclays alone paid out an estimated \$1.2 billion to some 410 of its employees last month after successfully selling its fund management arm. ... To the alarm of policy makers, a number of regulation initiatives have not just stalled but are being actively rolled back". The finance minister in the Labour government commented that the City, i.e. the centre of the British financial superstructure, remained "an immense asset to our country". Apparently, it will not be easy to chain the monster.*

legitimacy of slavery and so undermined the existing economic basis of the Roman Empire. Hence, after all, Saint Paul might be said to have contributed more to the downfall of the Romans than any single person could possibly hope for (Margetić, 2008).

In order to achieve whatever was intended by human interaction, that interaction must be stabilised in continuous activity. This is achieved by *social structures*, i.e. the defining of desirable behaviour by formulating rules and establishing values, as well as creating enduring institutional links among interacting individuals guiding them in their activity towards previously established goals. Values may contradict each other because under different circumstances different behaviour patterns seem desirable. For instance, the value of freedom cannot always be reconciled to the value of justice as people use their freedom to acquire advantages that in their further implications may appear as unjust. On the other hand, the insistence on justice as equality with positive exceptions for those in the weaker social situation (J. Rawls 1971) can in practice mean the curtailment of freedom. Rules can be an expression of values at the more concrete level of actual behaviour or instruments for the organising of institutions. The general problem is that social structures need a degree of stability in time in order to be able to achieve their purpose, but at the same time they should keep enough adaptability in order to be able to change in response to the constant flow of transformation in their environment. The dilemma between the stability and adaptation of social structures is a real one; it is illustrated by our daily experience as well as by human history.

Hence, human intervention in social development is limited on three dimensions:

- On the dimension of the initial genetically inherited opposite tendencies towards co-operation and towards conflict.
- On the dimension of boundary conditions, exogenous as well as endogenous, of human behaviour changing in various ways and at various levels – individual, local, regional, national, continental, global.
- On the dimension of rules, values and institutions that have to be sufficiently stable to give continuity to behaviour in the pursuit of a goal but at the same time sufficiently adaptable to the changing boundary conditions of human behaviour.

In order to illustrate the intricate interconnectedness and complex interaction of these dimensions, the following three examples will concentrate firstly on the interrelation between the local and the global level, secondly on the problem of over-stabilisation, and thirdly on the possibility of the insufficient stability of social structures.

Koper in the World

One of the qualities of the recent book by the Slovenian sociologist Zdravko Mlinar (2008), is that he succeeds in combining an in-depth case study of a local region with an analysis of worldwide trends in changing the boundary conditions of human interaction. Some theories of post-modern society predict the end of any kind of regularity in social change and, as a necessary implication, the end of planning:

"...when we reach post-modern society we can no longer count on regularities such as we knew, for instance, in the industrial era when whatever happened was under the influence of significant developmental processes (industrialization, urbanization, institutional stabilization etc.). In the post-modern context changes in all directions (open ended transformation) become possible. There is no longer linear or non-linear progress towards the future nor a common denominator for social changes that could become a new explanatory model, a grand narrative. There is rather an eclectic mixing of old and new elements in fundamentally different local and global constellations" (p. 10).

First, there is the problem of *space* in its physical sense. Increasing population pressure makes physical space an increasingly scarce good. Informational society creates a *virtual* space and with it an increase in the possibility of human interaction for orders of magnitude. The increase in interaction brings with it a simultaneous increase in possibilities of co-operation and conflict, but it cannot replace the living space as a framework for the physical existence of people.

The problem of the *limits to growth* is a possible source of conflict, especially given the growing tendency towards individualisation, and the greater freedom of choice for the individual (p. 8). The answer to the problem of limits to growth is not to stop growth in all cases nor to stimulate it everywhere, but to manage growth depending on its changing boundary conditions (p. 333).

Conflict, especially conflict about location in space, is a source of uncertainty (p. 18). There are conflicts of identities, particularly inter-ethnic conflicts and conflicts related to population movements during past wars (pp. 21-23, 91, 106, 235). There is criminal activity as a form of conflict (p. 46). There is conflict caused by the density of human interaction as such, and the need to regulate interaction (p. 74).

In fact, conflict is growing in tandem with the increase in co-operation worldwide, whatever its ostensible causes, whoever the antagonists involved, their relative strength and influence, the methods used, the depth

and the extent of its consequences. The opening up of virtual space may transform global co-operation from a possibility into a reality. But it may, at the same time, increase the frequency and pervasiveness of conflict beyond the limits we have learned to manage. As co-operation and conflict are not symmetrical, the problems posed by the management of one and the other will be different, but are likely to demand innovation on a scale never before considered. And both are likely to present limits to anticipation and thus to rational intervention.

Mlinar's book is only the first part of a project called "The Living Environment in the Global and Informational Era" (*Življensko okolje v globalni in informacijski dobi*). Accordingly, we will have to wait for his future publications in order to see what his answer is to the problems raised in this article, particularly to what extent he agrees with the opinion, quoted at the beginning, about the essential irregularities of post-modern society. My guess is that he will find that the relationship between theoretical social science and practical social action has changed, at least for the time being. Social science, as any other theoretical system of thinking about reality, tends towards generalisations. And generalisations will be possible only at more and more abstract levels, further and further removed from actual social problems. Hence, the ability of social science to assist in the solution of everyday problems in society will be, at least temporarily, reduced. Or, instead, social scientists will lose the advantage they had in comparison with the experienced practitioner of being able to look at a problem from many sides at the same time using an abstract theoretical framework. The problems that will confront us will demand creative inventiveness in the 'here and now' that might be only hampered by theoretical generalisations of the kind we know from existing social science or that social science in the immediate future will be able to produce. Experienced practitioners will have as good a chance as any theoretically sophisticated sociologist to analyse a social problem and say what could be done about it, there and then. This is, however, not necessarily a permanent state of affairs. After having constructed their paradigmatic foundations, the social sciences have no other direction than to return to the practical problems of human society; if there still will be any society at that time.

Milovan Đilas and the One-Party System

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) came to power in a one-party system through a successful combination of armed resistance against the fascist invaders and occupiers with a successful armed revolution against the former ruling classes in the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The resistance was successful in so far as the country was liberated without the Soviet

army participating, significantly, in its territory. And the revolution was successful in so far as the anti-fascist armed resistance gave it legitimacy and sufficient initial popular support to suppress the violent animosities among the Yugoslav ethnic groups stimulated and exacerbated by the occupiers during the four years of war and occupation. These animosities were intensive enough to bring about the dissolution of Yugoslavia 45 years later after the demise of communism.

Immediately after World War II the Soviet Union tried to establish its unquestioned dominance over all Eastern European countries where communist regimes had been established. The leadership of the CPY resisted this dominance, conscious of its independent military and revolutionary success in the war. This led to the excommunication of the CPY from the alliance of communist parties in June 1948. The reaction of the CPY leadership to this ouster was twofold, in a sense contradictory. On one hand, the attempt was made to show complete loyalty to the communist idea, e.g. by the introduction of collective farms following the Soviet model. On the other, it involved looking for original solutions, derived from fundamentalist Marxism, such as the establishment of workers' councils in factories and other organisations.

This ambivalence developed further within the small inner circle of the CPY leadership, including Josip Broz Tito, Edvard Kardelj, Aleksandar Ranković and Milovan Đilas. It was especially Đilas, whose duties within the leading group included cultural matters, propaganda and ideology, who went public with a series of articles about the importance of freedom and democracy within the Yugoslav communist movement as well as generally in the country.

As a possible concrete measure he tentatively suggested the introduction of one alternative political party that would function as a corrective opposition to the ruling CPA, presumably both within an overall socialist framework.³

Retrospectively, it is easy to see that Đilas was right with his suggestions that the Yugoslav system of government needed some easing of the excessive rigidities that had started early through the concentration and centralisation of power in a one-party-system. It needed more elasticity and more adaptability that could only be achieved by a larger number of ideas obtaining legitimacy in the political arena. On the other hand, Đilas provided no institutional blueprint for an alternative, socialist and democratic, political system. One additional opposition party seems both unrealistic and insufficient.

³ In his *Memoirs* (*Vlast i Pobuna*, Zagreb, 2009), Đilas explains at length (e.g. pp. 335, 353, 358, 383) his ideas about freedom and democracy in general, but refers only fleetingly (p. 390) to a suggestion of a second political party.

The crucial question is whether such an alternative at that time and in this place was at all possible? Whether and in what measure were the main participants in the CPY leadership conscious of the danger that any form of multiparty system at that time could reopen the ethnic animosities among the nationalities in Yugoslavia that had been brought to white heat during the war, and that were still strong enough 40 years later to lead to the dissolution of Yugoslavia? The other essential question is what role was played in the discussion with and about Đilas by the threat of military intervention by the Soviet Union in the case of political disturbances in Yugoslavia? In light of the historical experience in Yugoslavia and in Eastern Europe during the second half of the 20th century it is easy to see that both the danger of inter-ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia and of Soviet intervention were clearly present.

These dangers spell out the limits to intervention in this case. But these limits were defined, even before considering the specific limitations of the concrete historical situation, by the very nature of the political structure. The system, however legitimised by its successful resistance to the occupiers, was a dictatorship unable to tolerate any public political opposition by the very principles of its functioning. When Tito was informed by regional Party leaders that Đilas' articles published in the Party newspaper "Borba" during the autumn of 1953 had caused considerable confusion and uncertainty among the Party members, he did not even take the time to speak with Đilas in private. The damage was done by the publication of the articles in the Party paper and could be undone, if at all, only by a prompt public repressive reaction against the author. The Party members, a considerable number of them in responsible positions throughout the political and economic structures of the country, were an indispensable support. Any vacillation, any uncertainty about what was the actual Party line could undermine that support and bring about incalculable harm. Whatever the possible feelings about Đilas and his ideas among the leadership,⁴ the limits of a possible space for manoeuvre had been reached.

To a certain extent these limits were seen by Đilas himself. In the first of his 18 articles in the autumn of 1953 he defines, at the most general level, the alternative social and political systems facing the world and Yugoslavia: capitalism and the bourgeoisie, bureaucracy and officialdom (meaning the regimes in Eastern Europe), socialism and democracy (2009, 358). But in a conversation with Vladimir Dedijer, Đilas quotes himself as saying:

⁴ *These feelings may have been, at least in part, positive as with Kardelj who, nevertheless launched an ideological attack against Đilas at the punitive plenary session of the CPY's Central Committee in January 1954, comparing Đilas to the German pre-World-War-I social democrat Bernstein. A comparison completely beside the point in view of the different circumstances in which both men – Đilas and Bernstein – wrote.*

“We do not agree about what should be done, but we agree in the appraisal that the Party and the country develop towards bureaucratic rule, coercion and stagnation. – Dedijer interrupted: We do not agree about that either. Your outlook is to negative. We should wait – I expect much from the communes mentioned by Kardelj. Here I interrupted him: Communes, that is only a measure of reorganizing the administration... Not long after our conversation Tito used the same words (reorganization of the administration) – in order to direct the Party bureaucracy away from the illusions raised by Kardelj’s ‘theories’ about the communes as a democratic change and a democratic way out” (392).

Dilas was aware that the possibility to reform the Yugoslav system within the structural boundaries of that system had reached its limits.

Stability and Adaptability in the European Union

The European Union is less stabilised than a state, but more stable and institutionally elaborate than an international treaty. This arrangement could be a really innovative answer to the old problem of stability *versus* adaptability in social structures. The EU would have the ability to achieve results agreed upon by its members without developing heavy and immobile executive structures of its own.

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens addresses this problem in his book “Europe in the Global Age” (2007). Will the EU be able to provide for a longer time the advantages of a state, i.e. supply a political framework for the management of co-operation and conflict, without the risk of armed confrontation within its boundaries or in the world at large?

“The EU is not a state; neither is it simply a free-trade area. Its identity is contentious, because it is in the nature of an ongoing experiment (175) ... I would define the EU as a democratic association (or community) of semi-sovereign nations (217).”

Is this delicate balance possible for a longer period of time without the Union hardening into a federation, the United States of Europe, or softening into a treaty between fully sovereign European states? We have seen, in the preceding example, how over-stable political structures can lead dynamic political movements into stagnation and one-party rule. Will the EU prove to be an example of the opposite possibility that the insufficient stability of a political structure should lead to confusion and, ultimately, to the disintegration of the Union as an institution capable of action?

Giddens starts his discussion of these possibilities beginning with the

goals of the Union, with the expectations Europeans tend to associate with it. Why should a European Union exist in the first place?

“Europe’s welfare system is often regarded as the jewel in the crown – perhaps the main feature that gives the European societies their special quality (1)...My version of it (the European Social Model) would be: (a) a developed and interventionist state, funded by relatively high levels of taxation; (b) a robust welfare system which provides effective social protection, to some considerable degree for all citizens, but especially for those most in need; (c) the limitation, or containment, of economic and other forms of inequality (2).”

The EU should strengthen the European Social Model and spread it across Europe.

The European Union should also be a factor in managing the world on equal terms with all other world powers. The task of managing the world arises from the fact of globalisation, that under the influence of scientific and technological progress the world is becoming an interacting unity where co-operation and conflict should not be left to their own unregulated dynamics.

574

“Some aspects of globalisation need to be managed, often at local, national and trans-national levels. ... This observation is as true of the world marketplace as it is of climate change, new style terrorism, money laundering or organized crime” (8)...Europeans have to come to terms with the fact that Europe is no longer the main pivot of global concerns. In this sense several centuries of world history have come to an end. However, Europe can, and should, aim to be a developed regional power with some considerable clout in world affairs (210–211).”

The European Union should also produce net economic benefits for all its member-states. After all, this is a precondition for the Europe-wide implementation of the European Social Model:

“The European Social Model is not purely social, since however it is defined, it depends fundamentally upon economic prosperity and redistribution. (1–2)... This is to say, the EU exists to bring economic benefits to its members that they otherwise would not have” (207).

The EU should particularly assist its poorer and less developed member-states to accelerate their economic development:

“We must hope that some poor regions, like, ‘backward’ nations, will be able to leapfrog directly into advanced sectors of the knowledge/service economy. For this to happen they will need substantial investment in IT and in education” (177).

The next question is by what institutional means should these goals be pursued and achieved? In general, Giddens defines the institutional nature of the EU negatively, by what it is not. The EU is neither a fully sovereign state, nor an association of fully sovereign states.

“Federalism...is an archaic mode of thinking in the contemporary world, nor the best way of working out how the EU should develop in the future. Yet Europe cannot be, as Margaret Thatcher wanted, from an opposing position, driven only by ‘willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states’” (210).

However large a part of history has come to an end, Giddens would still like the EU to retain some “military capability” (226). He is more explicit in policy recommendations related to education, pensions, employment and others, but leaves the details of the future institutional structure of the EU to be worked out on the basis of practical experience and future political development.

He is well aware of the difficulties and risks this future development is facing. Some goals are, at least to an extent, contradictory to each other, though all, by themselves, are desirable. For instance, among the goals of balanced budgets, low inequality and high employment only two can be pursued at the same time, but not all three (10). There might be more “directionless fluidity” present in EU countries than there was before (26). As a consequence of a lack of experience with structures of the type of the EU, the proposed measures are often tentative and timid (170). The identity of the EU is still an open question with its borders towards the East and the South still undefined (201). One of the questions the reader would like to put to Giddens himself concerns his constant emphasis on growth. In view of the existing and recognised limits to growth, how much and in what way can the ‘virtual space’ created by IT technologies push these limits back?

Finally, what are the results so far of the experiment that is the European Union? What does the balance sheet of the EU look like? What is the opinion of Europeans about its achievements and drawbacks? In answering these questions Giddens assumes two different roles. He has attached to his book an Open Letter, signed by himself and the German sociologist Ulrich Beck and published in the media, where they advocate the EU, pointing to its successes:

“The EU is the most original and successful experiment in political institution building since the Second World War. It has reunited Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It has influenced political change as far away as Ukraine and Turkey – not, as in the past, by military, but by peaceful means- Through its economic innovation it has played a part in bringing prosperity to millions ...But what the Union has achieved is in fact more profound. It has turned malign influences in European history – nationalism, colonialism, military adventurism – inside out. It has set up or supported institutions – such as the European Court of Human Rights – that not only reject but legislate against, the very barbarisms that have marked Europe’s own past” (231–232).

In his book, however, Giddens takes due note of the negative attitudes about the EU:

“The European project appears to many to be lapsing. Even some of its most dedicated supporters are experiencing doubt or second thoughts... Others have gone further. The historian Niall Ferguson, for example suggests that the European Union ‘is an entity on the brink of decline and perhaps ultimately even to destruction’” (229).

576

A much more dangerous signal, however, about existing and spreading negative attitudes to the EU among European voters was sent by the results of elections for the European Parliament in spring 2009. The centre-right political parties, inimical to any form of welfare state – in Giddens’ opinion the main plank in the EU platform – won the elections for the European Parliament in all major European countries, defeating the social democrats. Besides, extremist right-wing groups, representing nationalist and xenophobic attitudes and insisting on the national sovereignty of their states, were able to elect their candidates – some for the first time – to the European legislative body (Traynor, 2009).

This seems, first of all, to show that the potential for conflict is present in any form of human interaction in spite of the intentions of the actors being directed primarily towards co-operation. But the basic question considered in this example is a different one. Are we able to stabilise a political structure sufficiently to prevent armed conflict among its members, without imposing an overall superior sovereignty over them? Alternatively, is this half-way stabilisation insufficient to keep the Union together as a significant, though specific, actor in world politics?

Without a doubt, there are limits to intervention. We cannot do everything we know should be done and know how to do; even if we knew it more cogently and more dependably than we actually do.

The first reason for this is the contradictory initial conditions of human interaction, the simultaneous potential presence of both co-operation and conflict. It is not only the asymmetric relationship between the two; the tendency of conflict to escalate beyond its initial motives, towards physical confrontation and then even further, out of control of the participants in the conflict themselves. Co-operation may be indispensable to prevail in conflict, or to survive in it, and thus become marked by affects stemming from conflict. There may be co-operation between parties in conflict, meant to reduce the inhumanity of its consequences, such as in the international law of war. On the other hand, co-operation can lead to conflict by the effects of irritation through lasting proximity and mutual dependence. Co-operation can be reinforced by emotional bonds, such as between sexual partners or between parents and children, among friends or within cohesive social identities of any sort. It is a question of fact in each case for how long and in what conditions these emotional bonds cementing co-operation can neutralise the irritation produced by constant nearness and, often disappointed, expectations of reciprocity. The initial conditions of human interaction are stabilised at the level of our genetic heritage, before the emergence of the species *homo sapiens*. Therefore, it seems unrealistic to assume the possibility of a human society without either co-operation or conflict. On the other hand, human society, interconnected by co-operation and divided by conflict at the same time, cannot achieve sufficient stability to be the foundation of complex systems of interaction lasting through time, that are made possible, in principle, by the specific condition of human consciousness.

Additional stability, therefore, had to be produced by patterns of behaviour stabilised not on the level of genetic biochemistry, but on the level of human consciousness itself; behaviour patterns such as generalised values, systems of rules, institutions. These patterns are inherently more mobile and more adaptable, but also less stable than the genetically stabilised initial conditions. Alternatively put, these patterns stabilise behaviour within a wider span but also with a greater risk of, on one side, over-stability, meaning the inability to adapt in time to changes in the environment and, on the other, under-stability, implying too much fluidity and a lack of enduring identity. These patterns are part of the *boundary conditions* of human behaviour. Another part is the environment, i.e. facts influencing human existence and activity from the outside, whether they are the consequence, the material residue of previous human activity, e.g. a city, or are the product of natural

processes independent of human agency, e.g. an earthquake, or a mixture of the two, e.g. the melting of polar ice. A third kind of boundary conditions is the 'internal environment', i.e. whatever the human mind produces besides goal-directed cause-effect thinking, such as emotions, affects, susceptibilities, imaginings, beliefs, fears – independent of any factual basis.

Thus, human consciousness guiding human action faces manifold challenges. It has to try steering the consequences of the initial conditions of human interaction, co-operation and conflict in ways that will maximise the benefits and minimise the threats posed by the contradictory nature of these conditions that may, for practical reasons, be considered unchangeable. It may use the stimulating effect of conflict, e.g. in economic competition, while at the same time taking measures in order to avoid the escalation of conflict beyond its positive motivational influence and towards the high-water mark when it escapes control by any human agency. It can build structures channelling conflict towards more innocuous objectives of winning a game, doing better in a sport, being more persuasive in a debate. Or it can invent forms of virtual conflict – as in literature and the performing arts – where watching conflict satisfies, to some extent, the urge to participate in it. It can try to make co-operation less irritating by making it less mechanical and less monotonous.

The same is true of the boundary conditions of human interaction in all their forms. Human consciousness is producing the social structures – beliefs, values, rules, institutions – that give human behaviour additional stability, but are facing at the same time their own dilemma between too little and too much stability, over-stabilisation and under-stabilisation, with both being likely to defeat the purpose of the social structure. This purpose is to make human behaviour more predictable, but below the point where human capacity to change and to adapt to the ever changing circumstances in the environment becomes seriously impaired. Human consciousness can also create structures that are able, to an extent, to neutralise the paralysing effect of surprising and abnormal natural phenomena – such as floods, droughts, violent storms – by making preparations to meet their effects before any sign of such approaching events become visible. Since the emergence of the human species there were efforts, often associated with religious beliefs, to bring under control the non-rational products of the human mind, such as passions, irrational fears and animosities.

Even this short list of the fields and occasions where human interaction may lead to consequences that are at odds with the purposes motivating the respective human behaviour in the first place or that generate other undesirable consequences and side-effects shows that both the initial and the boundary conditions of human interaction simultaneously represent the limits to human intervention in the conditions of their own existence.

All social structures and other measures meant to influence the course of human affairs may succeed and they may fail, in the short run as well as in the long. Conflicts may escalate out of control. Co-operation may fade for lack of motivation. Social structures may harden into useless rituals or they may dissolve for lack of stabilisation. The measures taken in order to meet possible future events may prove adequate or may fall short of their intended goals. Some people may for some time bring their irrationalities under control, but hardly all of the people all of the time.

It seems, though, that this situation is changing with time. There is a general impression that we are making progress in the handling of macro-conflicts among large political structures after they have reached a level of complexity and sophistication. At the same time, however, the destructiveness of the instruments of war is increasing towards the point when even a single all-out conflict, either among states or triggered by non-state organisations, could produce catastrophic consequences for the world as a whole. Alternatively, traditional criminal activity, treated as marginal and exceptional behaviour, however widespread, and reacted against accordingly by public police services, might develop into one or several worldwide organisations that are, in their armed might and destructive potential, equal or superior to most states. Further, conditions might change in such a way that an increasing part of a growing world population will have to live in permanent conflict about dwindling physical space or increasingly scarce natural resources.

Finally, the various categories mentioned here, as well as the distinction between positive and negative consequences of any of them for human survival and development, are produced by our minds in order to facilitate our orientation and understanding. There is nothing essentialist about them, they do not correspond necessarily to anything that exists or is going on 'out there' in the world. In reality, everything is intermixed; different and even contradictory categories can co-exist and produce, by their interaction, results that are truly unexpected and practically unforeseeable. To this it must be added that most of the categories mentioned cannot, as yet, be measured at all or not with sufficient precision, or in all fields.⁵ The interwoven and contradictory character of reality, as well as the lack of precision in treating the data available, define the essential limits to the intervention of humanity in its own destiny.

Let us return to the beginning and to our examples. The response to "The Limits to Growth", almost 40 years later, by seeking the way out of a worldwide economic crisis through "a return to growth" is not the contradiction it

⁵ *Where measurement could be introduced, as in economics, the overall social outcomes of economic intervention still cannot be measured.*

seems when we consider the imprecise character of the term “growth” and the intentional absence of a clarification of the interest relations involved. More nuclear bombs are also economic growth. Growth can be bought at the price of greater inequality within single countries as well as worldwide.⁶

Alternatively, take the problem of the interaction of levels – local, regional, national, international, global – analysed by Mlinar in his study of Koper. It is obvious that the different levels may positively complement each other so that, for instance, global demand stimulates local activity or outside resources are added to those locally available. It is equally obvious that the different levels may negatively interfere with each other, such as when a national law defining the territories of regions and localities disappoints the expectations of local planners, or a worldwide economic crisis is felt in Koper’s economy. It is also clear that both kinds of influences, complementary and interfering, may co-exist at the same time, that they may vary in strength and in character. All of this makes the final overall result more difficult to calculate, more a matter of a quick response to opportunities and challenges as they present themselves rather than a matter of foresight and preparation.

Further, take the case of Đilas’ critique of the CPY dictatorship in Yugoslavia. A dictatorship is in itself, as a rule, a case of over-stabilisation. In Yugoslavia the political system was additionally stabilised by its origin in a successful war against foreign occupiers and further legitimised by its successful resistance against the hegemonic pretensions of the USSR. The usual recipe for this kind of situation is increasing the elasticity and adaptability of the political structure and decreasing its over-stabilisation. But the actual constellation at that moment made it extremely risky to follow that recipe. Had the introduction of a second political party into the system, as advocated by Đilas, led to any conflict along ethnic lines between the Yugoslav ethnic groups – a highly probable outcome, in the light of Yugoslav history after 1989 – it would have triggered a Soviet military intervention and pushed the country into a new occupational nightmare. These were clear limits to what the Yugoslavs could have done politically at that time, limits set by the overall situation in Eastern Europe. Independently, however, of that situation, the limits to intervention were also defined by the structure of an over-stabilised dictatorship. After 1989 the regime proved unable to reform: after the demise of the CPY the country disintegrated.

Also take the case of the European Union. It is the first serious effort to set up a new type of political structure, stabilised enough to achieve and

⁶ *The fact that American bankers used 10% of the public money given to them in order to weather the crisis by paying bonuses to themselves illustrates what ‘growth’ can mean in terms of inequality, however ‘shameful’ this behaviour may seem to the American President.*

guide political co-operation, but not stable enough to engage in conflict with other states or similar political structures. This sounds both easy and convincing but it is, in fact, an extremely difficult feat of political equilibrists, never tried before. The first thing that meets the eye are the shortcomings. Referenda about the fundamental rules on how to manage the Union led to negative outcomes in a number of countries for reasons that reflect more the vague uneasiness of the electorate than any clear and generally understandable reason. Some member-states are using their veto power against candidate-states in order to prevail in a bilateral conflict of interest. When an intervention by the use of military force is called for, the Union is not stabilised enough to organise military intervention on its own. The worldwide economic recession, though triggered by American financial institutions, has not spared Europe in spite of the existence of the Union and the European Bank. All such events and incidents have created over time an atmosphere of uneasy scepticism about the prospects of the Union for the future. On the other hand, the Union has, over the same period, built a whole new institutional network, it has engaged leading European national politicians in the Union's business, and has made even the larger European states look petty in comparison, less like the big powers they certainly were up to the end of World War II. Today, it already seems difficult to imagine the political functioning of the continent in world politics without the Union. In short, the appraisal of the single-most important innovation the world has seen since the emergence of the modern state, the European Union, is still an open question.

The prospect of tracing the initial conditions of human interaction to our genetic heritage means the possibility to reach and cross the paradigmatic threshold in the social sciences. Nevertheless, the immediate increase in our knowledge of the human potential and, thus, the possibility to foresee future human development and do something about it, is likely to be less than spectacular. The reason for this is, first and foremost, the asymmetric and contrary nature of these initial conditions. Co-operation and conflict interfere with each other in ways that are difficult to pin down and systematise in advance. Add to this the multiplicity and the nature of the boundary conditions of human interaction, from random natural events to the most unexpected products of the human mind. The conclusion is that even such an astonishing advance as being able to define the roots of human behaviour in terms of genetic biochemistry will not, in the short run, significantly improve our power to foresee and to influence future human evolution.

Nevertheless, the situation will be radically different. The starting point for asking questions about human behaviour, the interplay of co-operation and conflict, will change the social sciences more by what it excludes than by what it contributes. It will become impossible to explain human society only

by co-operation (Durkheim) or exclusively as conflict (Marx). It is not only that transcendent explanations will be definitely transferred to the realm of the imaginary, but all explanations of human behaviour that ignore the evolution of life as a whole are becoming unsatisfactory. We are certainly about to cross a threshold, even if our faculties to take our fate into our own hands will not grow in proportion to the importance of our fundamental insight.

LITERATURE

- Margetić, Lujó (2008): "Saint Paul and Karl Marx - Two Great Personalities of the Universal History". *Rad Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti* No. 500, pp. 109-146.
- Mlinar, Zdravko (2008): "Prostorno-časovna organizacija bivanja - raziskovanja na Koperskem in v svetu" (Spatio-temporal organisation of living - Exploration in the region of Koper and in the World). Ljubljana: Fakulteta za družbene vede in SAZU.
- Traynor, Ian (2009): "The Guardian Weekly", June 12-18, pp. 1-2.