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Sobriety

Bruno Villalba¹

Abstract: Sobriety has long been a personal ethical choice, as well as a theological imperative. The idea of sobriety hinges on individuals' decisions to renounce the superficial (material goods and ostentation), to focus instead on the essential: developing a mind which is composed and at peace. There have also been political drives for sobriety, largely because of the interweaving of religion and political power. The dawn of the Anthropocene brings sobriety, and its political role, into a completely new light. A sober mindset tells us that we must keep our needs, desires and behaviours proportional to what the planet is able to cope with; in that sense, sobriety becomes a policy of turning one's back on the ceaseless desire to accumulate possessions. This relates to all aspects of social activity (work, energy, leisure, transport, food and much more), globally. The anthropological fundamentals of modern existence (individual freedom through material wellbeing) are called into question, with a view to establishing a proportionate relationship with the Earth system.

In Greek, *sophrosunè*, and in Latin, *sobrietas*, the etymology of sobriety refers to *moderation*, as a sensible measure. It is a form of frugality, but one which does not entail a complete and utter renouncement of the material mindset which shapes the world today. Above all, the aim of sobriety is to prevent *hubris* – disproportionate behaviour, intemperance and excess which, according to Aristotle, leads to ‘deregulation’, the creation of an imbalance in the human body. It is primarily a question of temperance, which is a sign of personal ‘moral virtue’: by avoiding excess, the individual maintains self-control. By extension, this perception can also apply to the body politic of the people, as is the case in the democratic model. Political regimes should not quest for material wealth at all costs – to do so would be *hubris*. Instead, they should aim to regulate such wealth sensibly (Aristotle uses the term ‘liberality’ to denote this idea), which entails moderation in production and balance in the distribution of wealth.

Constructing a moral sense of moderation

The stoicists (Zeno of Citium, Seneca, Epictetus and other leading figures) champion the ideal of a form of frugality, indicative of the wise man's ability to reach a moderate relationship with the world and its excessive wealth (luxury, etc.). The wise man, they teach, focuses on developing internal moral resources – in particular, those which will allow him to come to terms with his own mortality. Stoicism aims to achieve *ataraxia* – tranquillity of the soul; inner peace. Epicureans (Epicurus, Lucretius, etc.) favour the principle of balance, in opposition to all forms of excess, including excess in the pursuit of moderation. What is important, in their view, is to build self-sufficiency. Indeed, self-sufficiency is the principle pursued by both these schools of philosophical thought, with individuals being endowed with a personal ethical sense of moderation, based on self-knowledge and bringing inner peace.

Echoes of this quest for internal moderation can be heard in the words of certain modern philosophers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1992). Rousseau rails against what is useless, ostentatious luxury and the harmful imitation thereof which leads society down a rabbit hole, on a never-ending and ludicrous quest, reducing the interest which is paid to public assets and civic virtue.

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Monotheistic religions (such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity), along with Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism frequently call for sobriety. From this point of view, however, sobriety is defined by recognising the omnipotence of the supreme being or entity and, through humility, subjugating oneself to the deity's authority. For example, in Christianity, sobriety represents the desire to focus on the essential: prayer, in the quest to save one's immortal soul. 'The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray' (*First Epistle of Peter*, 4:7) Evangelical poverty is portrayed as a virtue, because it marks compliance with the message of God: the faithful adjust their practices to the divine precepts. Self-denial proves the casting aside of worldly goods and leads Christians to form a closer relationship with other human beings, and with all God's creatures (including animals, according to St Francis of Assisi). Other thinkers, too, embrace the spiritual dimension, questioning the relationship we have with materiality in the modern world. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson and David H. Thoreau advocate a frugal existence, to rid oneself of the superficiality characteristic of the western world. Recently, Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato si'. On care for our common home* (2015), reaffirms the need to develop 'Christian spirituality [which] proposes growth through sobriety, and the capacity to be happy with little'. The Christian faith includes 'our sister, Mother Earth', in the name of the shared suffering of humans and the planet. Thus, the encyclical underlines the need to associate the principle of sufficiency with ecological matters, in order to comply with God's wishes. (The English version uses the term moderation) Finally, as Marshall Sahlins (1972) points out, sobriety is not a purely western moral stance, because the earliest peoples developed the principles of collective self-limitation, aimed at controlling humans' impact on the world, to ensure their own survival.

These approaches (both philosophical and religious) were developed in the context of a *certain* world – a world designed without limits, subject in its entirety to the infinite will of God or of reason. That is to say, the idea of moderation did not arise in the context of limited material resources, marked by the prospect of irreversible change, such as we face today.

Abundance and freedom

In the modern era, the morality of self-restraint tends to be downplayed. Thanks to the explosion of scientific knowledge and the development of technological might, in modern society, it is possible to produce material goods on an ever-growing scale. The democratic system champions individual freedom. This is not just a simple ethical stance: the concept is constructed on the basis of the accumulation of rights for one and all (political rights, social rights, the right to recognition, and so forth). These rights ought to lead to constant improvement in material living conditions. The growth of wellbeing for all individuals is a tangible marker of freedom. In implementing this creed, however, liberal democracy allows the development of a right to have one's needs met, and then a right to have one's desires met. That objective can be achieved through industrial productivism. Liberal democratic regimes, just as Marxist regimes once did, continue to negotiate the terms of a social contract based on the constant accumulation of material possessions. The cornucopia is now a reality (Cotgrove, 1982).

This leads to a 'Great Acceleration' (Steffen et al., 2011, 842–867) of the anthropic pressures on the Earth system. World population is constantly growing, and with it, so too are the needs of that population (in terms of energy, food, etc.). What does it matter if the satisfaction of desires is very unequally distributed – if not everyone *yet* has access to optimum comfort (Shove, 2003, 395-418)? The promise of plenty is still felt, and thanks to technological innovation, markets and social policies of redistribution, one day, everyone should be able to access that level of living comfort.

Sobriety and the limits of the planet

In vain, theorists have tried, and continue to try, to demonstrate the impossibility of reconciling this idea of limitless abundance with the very real limits of the material world. Some advocate

sufficiency as the means of a more balanced existence (Erich Fromm, Paul R. Ehrlich, Anne H. Erlich and Duane Elgin, among others). Others cry for our current course of action to be reined in, in the interests of social justice (including Murray Bookchin and André Gorz). Yet more thinkers seek the conditions to bring about a shared ethos of convivial frugality (Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich, etc.), and happy coexistence (Pierre Rabhi), which allow humanity and nature to exist harmoniously (Dominique Bourg).

Today, though, in the newly dawned Anthropocene, the nature of sobriety has changed. It is no longer simply a question of catering for an internal need, but of adapting the way in which we live to take account of irreversible ecological imbalances. According to the 2015 Paris Climate Agreements, we need to decarbonise our economies. In order to do so, we must reduce humanity's carbon footprint to 2 tonnes CO₂ equivalent per capita per year, by 2050. To succeed, we have to reduce the footprint by 7-10% each year for 30 years, and then become totally carbon neutral between 2050 and 2100. Up until now, we have mainly looked at 'green growth' policies, technological innovations (such as nuclear power), transitioning to renewable energies, more efficient means of resource production, etc. Overall, though, these decoupling solutions have not achieved their aims, and merely shift the problem (causing harmful knock-on effects) or delay the implementation of the necessary adaptations. Whilst they do indeed help to reduce carbon emissions, they do not solve the anthropic causes of the constant pressure on the Earth system. The simple fact is that technological efficiency does nothing to rectify the burgeoning needs of the human population, and alternative forms of energy merely shift the balance of our dependency on non-renewable resources.

It is for this reason that the IPCC's report published on 4 April 2022, for the first time, has an entire chapter given over to how to change individuals' behaviour, calling for the development of demand-management policies ('deep demand reduction, low demand scenarios, reduced demand, demand-side options, and demand-side measures', section 5.3.3). The report focuses on lifestyle choices, institutions and cultural norms, and essentially emphasises the tryptic *Avoid* (consume less of something), *Shift* (substitute one type of consumption for another) and *Improve* (make an existing mode of consumption greener). However, the terms *sobriety*, *soberness*, *restraint* and *sufficiency* do not appear in the Summary for Policymakers, in Chapter 5 of the report entitled 'Demand, services and social aspects of mitigation', or in the *Glossary (Annex VII)*. More than anything else, the report advocates constructing policies of 'deep demand-side reductions incorporating socio-cultural change and the cascade effects' (Section 5.3.3). The objective remains to bring about a 'transition toward high well-being and low-carbon demand societies' (Section 5.4), with emphasis being placed on the services provided rather than on the quantity of primary energy available. Although we can plainly see the urgent need to implement measures, and quickly, the report stops short of calling for a sober attitude among humans as a means of achieving that goal. Sobriety has yet to become political capital.

Politicising sobriety

We find ourselves facing a profound contradiction: ought we to continue, or even ramp up, development-driven policies in the name of social justice and the free market... or ought we, on the other hand, to attempt to control – or, even better, reduce – the negative impact that we are having on the Earth system? In the quest for intragenerational balance, we run the risk of perpetuating certain economic policies, and a certain way of living, which are continually chipping away at the planet's finite, non-renewable resources. We also need to pay attention to intergenerational balance, so that future generations may enjoy ranges of choices equivalent to those which we, ourselves, enjoy. However, our ability to act is significantly constrained by the limits of the planet: no longer is it a matter of answering the call for *the right to have rights* (the political perspectives upon which liberal democracy is founded), but instead, of measuring *what*

we can still access (Heinberg, 2007), fairly and sustainably. Indeed, we must begin to spotlight a policy of sobriety which will allow cohesion among human societies, living ecosystems and the Earth system to endure in the long term.

In order to achieve this, it is necessary to enter into a debate as to the terms, objectives and ends of the policies developed on the basis of the principle of sobriety (Princen, 2005). What are the fundamental needs and standards of wellbeing common to everyone, which are compatible with what the planet can sustain (O'Neill et al., 2018, 88–95)? What must we give up in order to keep what is necessary – what is essential? How can we fairly distribute this renouncement of the superfluous, to enable as many people as possible to attain a certain level of comfort? How much is enough (Spengler 2016, 921-940; Villalba et al., 2018)? Such a debate could help to overcome the distaste for sobriety: it would not be reactionary (a step backwards in favour of traditional morals), technophobic or unequal... Whilst the idea of having less may seem counterintuitive and thus meet with some resistance, sobriety is actually an inoffensive doctrine, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it offers quick solutions by which we can begin to address the ecological disasters we face (everyone can easily reduce their ecological impact by assessing the consequences of their behaviour as consumers and professionals). Such an approach would, above all, highlight the extent of individuals' freedom to make decisions. Every individual can determine their own ability to break free of the consumerist trends which aggravate social frustration (Günther Anders, Ivan Illich). Thus, we can examine our own relationship with productivity and the social function of work (André Gorz). Social trends may finally break free from the continuous acceleration of how we live (Hartmut Rosa). Sobriety-driven policies would open up vast ranges of potential strategies to adapt to the complex situations we face. In that sense, they have the potential to free us up to take action in a way unparalleled by the technology-based options (which actually reduce our civic abilities to take action). Sobriety policies would have a different impact on matters of social inequality, because they go beyond the framework of technological reorganisation of redistributing fairness (*more for more people*), reframing the conditions for a fair situation that takes account of the ecological limits (Alcott, 2008, 770-786). Finally (and this is the most important aspect, all too often overlooked), sobriety-based policies would help shift the focus of political debate, integrating the perspective of the living world, soil, and biodiversity. Sobriety forces us to re-examine our anthropocentric perspective, which currently dominates all over the world, and ensures that non-humans are afforded a duly significant place in the discussions. This eco-centric stance is a logical consequence of a worldview which is no longer based solely on the wants and needs of humans, but on the complex web of interactions between humans and other terrestrial beings. Of course, sobriety-based policies can only be developed through democratic debate. The task will involve a great deal of political juggling between irreversible ecological impacts and social inequality. As part of the debate, we can examine and discuss complex potential means of action (such as quotas, rationing, environmental taxes, and so forth). In addition, the negotiations will need to take place at different levels of the decision-making hierarchy, from local to international.

Sobriety is a transition which appears to offer the least drastic way possible of moving from one type of world (one of abundance without consequence), and adapting our societies to exist in a more constrained world. It is both a method and a narrative. As a method, it calls into question the viability of the transitional solutions that are deployed, taking account of the consequences of our decisions for fairness. Thus, sobriety is a social and political process of coordination, of negotiation, aimed at establishing equitable division of the effort required to reduce the consequences of our social practices on ecological balances. As a narrative, it calls into question the very foundations of our political apparatus (institutional dimensions, means of production, individual identity, scientific perspectives, etc.) by viewing them in relation to

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the horrific reality of ecological meltdown, with no form of sugar-coating. However, it opens up new prospects for individual emancipation and a more balanced, sustainable relationship with the Earth system.

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