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Article

The Great Reset as a Realistic Utopia. A Critical Stance from the Theory of Complex Systems

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Abstract: The Great Reset has been presented by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022 as a model through which a "stakeholder economy" would achieve "resilient, equitable and sustainable" economic, social and environmental goals. A more equitable distribution of resources, better working conditions, and ecological transitions are included in a social, economic and environmental reform agenda. This article raises the question of whether the Great Reset project should be interpreted as a "realistic utopia" and what is its reform potential. In an attempt to answer the question of whether the Great Reset as a realist utopia is consistent with the current state of science and philosophy, the article re-examines the idea of utopia in the light of recent philosophical and scientific approaches, such as critical realism in philosophy, social systems theory in sociology and complexity theory in science. A comparative conceptual analysis is carried out and discussed introducing the idea of a realist utopia in Rawls' theory of justice as fairness. In the final discussion, some doubts are raised about the logical coherence, rigor of scientific theorizing, policy prescriptions, and predictive potential of the Great Reset emerging paradigm. It is concluded that utopian projects of radical reform can become realistic when they offer explanations of the deep structural changes that underlie social and economic evolution, drawing from these explanations the policy implications and prescription that can support structural changes, rather than from assumed long-term effects of exogenous shocks or "black swan" events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: great reset; realist utopia; complexity theory; social systems theory; critical realism; justice as fairness

1. Introduction

The Great Reset was theorized by the World Economic Forum, notably in the work of Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret [1], as a proposal for radical economic and social reform following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The sudden health emergency and the ensuing lockdown that spread from China to Western countries led to a decline in economic activity and a rise in unemployment. It created the perception that radical changes in the social, economic, environmental and technological spheres were necessary and could indeed occur in the near future. These changes were deemed necessary to drastically reduce CO2 emissions and address the economic and social problems of developing and developed countries, in particular the poverty gap between the North and South of the planet and the growing economic inequality affecting most developed countries. Some radical policy proposals aimed at supporting change in the directions envisioned by the Great Reset went so far as to air ideas such as "own nothing and be happy," which would require radical changes in the way income and wealth are produced and distributed. Less radical proposals, such as those of [1], sought to impose stricter rules not on ownership, wealth and production per se, but on the use and distribution of income and wealth to achieve sustainability goals [2–4].

The Great Reset [1] takes advantage of the global pandemic crisis to propose the reshaping of the world's economic and social systems, focusing on macro-social and economic issues and the climate crisis. It is believed that economic and social conditions can be improved by resorting to stakeholder capitalism (including employees, customers/users and the community, in addition to investors, in decision-making processes and governance) rather than shareholder capitalism; addressing social inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic (including providing better access to

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education and healthcare); including sustainable development objectives in corporate goals, which would encourage investment in green technologies and sustainable practices; promoting inclusive economic growth. Technological innovation is seen as a key element in accelerating the digital transformation of industry and society, including the fourth industrial revolution that leverages advances in artificial intelligence, robotics and other digital technologies to create more efficient and resilient organizations and socioeconomic systems. Economic policy would rely primarily on public-private partnerships that foster collaboration between governments, businesses and civil society to drive systemic change. Resistance to change and negative shocks (health crises, economic disruption or environmental catastrophes) would be addressed through resilient and adaptive governance structures that can respond swiftly to emerging challenges [5]. Policy prescriptions include, in particular, investments in innovation that support sustainability and resilience, educational skills development to prepare citizens for the fourth industrial revolution, and community engagement that involves citizens and social groups in policy decisions.

This article takes up and analyzes the idea of the Great Reset in terms of its utopian imprint, asking whether and to what extent the Great Reset can be considered a modern utopia, and testing its realism against the historical and theoretical criteria used by its main authors to develop it, as well as its ex post capacity to predict and correctly interpret the social and economic changes that have occurred since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Great Reset was supposedly conceived as a constructivist "realist" utopia that sets goals and standards for sustainability and analyzes the evolution of social systems in an attempt to steer them in the direction the authors consider desirable. For this purpose, various theoretical currents of social philosophy and social sciences are considered. In the philosophical field, paradoxical thinking and critical realism are introduced to evaluate the realism and constructivism of the utopian proposals inscribed in the Great Reset project. In addition, complexity theory and social science social systems theory are used to analyze how the Great Reset project developed both theoretically and in terms of policy proposals to assess its ability to fit with the understanding of social and economic change found in the specialized literature.

The well-known case of "realist utopianism" found in Rawls' political liberalism and the "law of peoples" embodied in his theory of justice as fairness [6–9] is considered and discussed to show how realist utopias can develop and what criteria they require to achieve political viability [10–12]. It is argued that Rawls's political liberalism, his political conception of justice, can express policies and social engineering that are, at least in principle, feasible though difficult to implement in capitalist market economies. The norms on which such policies and social engineering are based reflect how people would make political decisions and behave if they were in an original social position under the veil of ignorance. Rawls suggested that his political conception is "realistic" insofar as it reflects human morality and psychology, just as it is "utopian" insofar as it imagines new international relations (based on his criteria of justice, especially the difference principle) that can be developed but do not yet exist. According to Rawls, a realistic utopia is a political framework that extends the practical limits of politics, but does so in a way that is compatible with our existing "political and social conditions" and the "fact of reasonable pluralism" [10,11].

The discussion developed in the paper leads to the conclusion that the Great Reset project is problematic both in terms of theory and in terms of its ability to provide reasonable and effective policy proposals. From a theoretical point of view, it is argued that the Great Reset lacks theoretical coherence because it does not analyze the evolution of the social system in terms of endogenous structural change, complexity, and the ability to create its own "rules of operation" and "governance structures," which could help sustain change toward sustainability without requiring intrusive interventions by external, especially public, authorities. In other words, Great Reset tends to focus too much on the implications of exogenous shocks dictated by the pandemic and climate change, and too little on the historical roots of social change, and how endogenously produced social change can be directed toward the sustainability goals cherished by similar projects. From a policy perspective, Great Reset projects too often propose restrictive and controlling interventions on the functioning of the economy and on individual behavior, while being weak in terms of proposals that could incentivize endogenous change, such as endeavoring cultural campaigns, introducing new

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technologies and exploiting economies of scale in production that could support the system in autonomously pursuing sustainability goals.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 spells out and discusses the theoretical background, introducing ideas that come from social and political philosophy (the concept of realist utopia), and the theory of complex social systems. An application of theory is found in Rawls's concept of "realist utopias". Section 3 discusses and criticizes the Great Reset as an instance of realist utopias. Section 4 concludes with some theoretical discussion and policy recommendations.

2. Conceptual Background

The conceptual background starts from the premise that, given the complexity of processes of social change, which are by their nature nonlinear and emergent, any project of radical economic and social reform must be evaluated using, in the first stance, rigorous criteria of philosophic and scientific inquiry. The complexity of social change is often paradoxical, as the deep structures of society and the economy co-evolve with institutions. Small events and phenomena, which seem marginal and unimportant for long stretches of time, may turn out to be fast-growing and become dominant in much shorter periods [13,14]. This is true not only in cases of pandemic disease outbreaks, but also in more complex phenomena of social and political change, such as the Industrial Revolution in England in the 17th and 18th centuries, or the spread of new communication technologies and digitalization, i.e., the internet and artificial intelligence from the late 20th century to the present day. Given the non-linear, emergent and paradoxical nature of change in economic and technological structures, it is necessary to understand the nature of change, whether spontaneous or induced by social policy or other forms of social engineering [15]. The study of past technological and institutional evolution can teach important lessons and give important insights into future change, even if the latter can never be predicted with any degree of qualitative and quantitative accuracy, but only prefigured ex-ante, understood and described ex-post [16].

The thesis of this article is that the utopian imagination of future change is strictly related to the understanding of past evolution rather than to the mere extrapolation of desirable changes dictated by imminent dangers and abstract criteria of sustainability. Disruptive events may provide some scope for the introduction of new policy provisions and initiatives to support change, but they must be framed within a longer time span of structural social change, and not abstracted from it. Precisely because social change must first be imagined in an utopian fashion, and then understood and analyzed in its own evolutionary terms, this paper seeks to take advantage of social theories that harness a greater capacity to help change flow in desired directions without imposing predetermined solutions that may be perceived as alien and hostile to the nature of social relations in a specific historical context [17,18]. The imposition of overly restrictive rules against environmental degradation in agriculture and the fight against pollution and CO2 emissions in urban areas may lead to serious cases of rejection of such measures, such as the phenomenon of the gilets jaunes in France in 2018 or the invasion of tractors in most European cities, including Paris and Brussels, in 2024. Moreover, the sudden economic downturn due to COVID-19 and the resulting exponential increase in unemployment in 2020 cannot be assumed to represent the starting point for profound structural changes in the labor market, as most Great Reset advocates intended. The normalization of health conditions that began in mid-2021 led to a collateral normalization of economic conditions (excluding for now only a significant resurgence of inflationary pressures and interest rates). From 2021 onwards, especially in the United States, a sustained improvement in economic growth and a reduction in unemployment to historic lows were observed, contrary to the predictions of the Great Reset scholars.

In its endeavor to address the study of structural social change, rather than simply the consequences of unpredictable events, this paper draws conceptual tools that can help focus on past evolution to envision future change. Paradoxical thinking and critical realism are established to detect social anomalies and their underlying structural conditions observed in specific historical circumstances. Anomalies and inconsistencies can allow the detection of the reasonable direction of change. On the other hand, social theory, as it declines in complex systems theory, can analyze the

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nonlinear emergence of novel structures based on the path-dependent and non-reversible (non-ergodic) evolution of pre-existing conditions that may not yet have exerted their full force.

2.1. Paradoxes in the Social Sciences and Critical Realism

This contribution challenges the idea that utopias cannot be realistic by resorting to a speculative methodology that has to do with the ontology of social reality. To achieve this goal, it exploits paradoxical thinking.

By framing recurring tensions as a paradox – a 'persistent contradiction between interdependent elements' Schad, Lewis, and Smith [19, p. 10] – scholars endeavor to explore opposing elements' relationships. The paradoxical elements form a duality in that they are 'oppositional to one another yet […] also synergistic' Smith and Lewis [20, 386]; they thus simultaneously support and oppose one another [21]. In Schad and Bansal [22, p. 1492]

To the extent that "utopia" and "realism" are considered an oxymoron, paradoxical thinking refers to the "persistent contradiction between interdependent elements," which affect social reality but may be, at the same time, anomalous and contradictory [23, 19, p. 10]. When distinct concepts come together and are imagined as a unity, they constitute a paradoxical duality that embodies "a both/and relationship that is neither mutually exclusive nor antagonistic" [24]. Thus, opposing elements within the same unitary system can generate paradoxical interactions leading to system-level outcomes that can conceal, but not eliminate, radical contradictions within the system itself.

More importantly, hidden contradictions can develop and grow over time, giving rise to nonlinear dynamics and systemic changes that were not foreseen or even foreseeable to begin with [25]. Of course, change can come from within the system itself, but it can also be the result of more dialectical structural reforms coming from outside (e.g., government interventions or institutional design). The interaction between internal change and external intervention is, as always, complex and, by its very nature, difficult to predict. For example, the creation of large amounts of new employment, especially in the US, as occurred in the post-pandemic period after 2021, is perfectly compatible with widening income and wealth inequality at the macroeconomic level. This is clearly a paradoxical and contradictory economic outcome [26,27], which can exacerbate economic inequality, exacerbate economic cycles and widen the social divide even during periods of sustained economic growth [28].

To the extent that utopian thinking is most often aimed at predicting structural changes deemed desirable in future stages of social evolution, for example, to alleviate social problems, paradoxical thinking can be understood as a type of heuristic cue that allows anomalous and contradictory elements in a system to be identified and possible solutions to be devised. Examples are numerous. The tendency of social systems to overexploit certain natural resources to increase economic growth and wealth can lead to the carrying capacity of the system being overstretched and eventually exceeded, causing partial or total destruction of these resources and thus limiting economic growth [29,30]. This paradoxical outcome requires the introduction of new governance structures that can limit resource exploitation to environmentally sustainable levels and create new patterns of economic development, for example, through the replacement of a linear economy with increasingly effective elements of a circular economy [31]. More generally, contradictions in the social system can create endogenous generative processes of emergent social change to amend existing problems. They can often support social innovation or the introduction of new social structures and organizational forms (e.g., multistakeholder governance) or new technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence), which were previously considered beyond the reach of human society [32,33].

Realism enters this picture as a doctrine that does not exclude the critique of existing social realities on the basis of paradoxes and contrasting evidence but rather starts from the observation of reality and strives to use the very same elements of reality and its deep patterns of structural development as evidence of the realism and realizability of any theory and reform proposal, even of a utopian type. Theory and reform proposals, especially when they envision better scenarios and future societal outcomes, must be contrasted with facts and evidence on emerging social change. In According to Roy Bhaskar's [34,35] ontology, realism in the social sciences refers to the existence of

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stratified social relations that define the structures of society and the behavior of individuals within them. Empirical experience is only the emergent epiphenomenon of the workings of deeper real events and causal mechanisms that generate phenomena. Critical realism provides a framework for understanding how paradoxes, contradictions and anomalies can be analyzed to uncover the deep structures of reality. Generating mechanisms produce effects that affect objects and entities. Social change can be generated through a critique of social reality, taken in its layered and paradoxical expression. Anomalous events can challenge prevailing theories and scientific paradigms, revealing the need for social intervention and reform, while contradictions can drive change and development when opposing forces come into conflict. Emergent paradoxes often highlight the complexities and contradictions inherent in social structures and individual behaviors, compel a search for the underlying mechanisms, and point to the need for social change [34,35].

Although causal mechanisms can be studied by the social sciences as fundamental elements of social interaction, their complexity and the difficulty of observing and isolating them can make their study ineffective and controversial, since these mechanisms are not always activated in society. They may remain latent for long periods of time, hiding their effects, which, however, may still be real and momentous. Even when activated or activated but counteracted by other mechanisms, effects may not be perceived by individuals or even by scientists [36]. Difficulties in perceiving and observing complex mechanisms and effects can lead to scientific misrepresentations, inability to study important causal connections, and erroneous predictions [37]. The lack of temporary understanding and observation of some postulated mechanisms does not preclude their impact and crucial role in social evolution, just as an active volcano may lie dormant for several centuries before erupting but still remain active and influence human society (e.g., urbanization patterns).

It is recognized that human agency is crucially (causally) dependent on social structures, which emerge over time and require specific preconditions for their existence. Individual agency is considered a fundamental part of social evolution, through which individuals and social groups can consciously reflect on social change and bring it about through collective action. In Bhaskar's approach, social change involves social structures in processes of flux and change [34,35,38]. Critical realism pursues a strategy of analytical dualism in which a separation is created between the individual and the structure to allow the study of the interaction between the two, analyzing both individual freedom within social structures and the constraints imposed by these structures on individual behavior [39]. Such a social ontology based on the interaction between the individual and the structure adopts a constructivist perspective of social change, while mainstream social thought is criticized concerning the limitations of deductivism and formalism. [34,40].

The ontology of critical realism is compatible with an understanding of utopias in social thought that starts from socially paradoxical facts. Paradoxes highlight relationships between social elements-structures and people that exhibit anomalous elements and can be contradictory, leading to unexpected, inconsistent and even negative or conflicting outcomes. These relationships, although difficult to discern and not manifest, are real in that they represent forces that influence real structures and processes. The study of utopia, therefore, can be seen as part of a program of critical realism in which social paradoxes and contradictions represent clues or even heuristics, in some cases, for uncovering evidence about the causal mechanisms underlying social reality and imagining change [41]. Similarly, at least partially similar to the Great Reset project, the claim that conflictual or power-based social relations, rather than merit or productivity, will improve or, at any rate, change through progressive social action and reform, can be seen as a case of utopian realism that must be tested against the very underlying social forces and causal mechanisms upon which it is built [42].

2.2. Complexity Theory and Social Systems Theory

Complexity theory and social systems theory represent theoretical approaches in the social sciences that make it possible to develop new scientific paradigms of social evolution. They challenge the idea of the existence of simple social relations, the reductionist idea that each social process is simply the sum of the actions of its components (as for example when the demand for goods and services in the market is calculated as simply the sum of individual demands). To this reductionist

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view complexity theory opposes a holistic view in which the whole is more than the sum of its parts [37]. The study of complex systems can help to unravel important puzzles and resolve issues that more traditional approaches have not been able to address, let alone resolve. In the specific case of the analysis of realistic utopias such as The Great Reset, the study of complex systems can increase the analytical depth and understanding of the dynamics of social evolution, renouncing attempts to establish restrictive assumptions, as orthodox economics does. For example, it can distinguish between achievable or unachievable goals of social sustainability. It can also improve the ability of applied science to understand the outcomes of social processes, providing more realistic descriptions and forecasts and ruling out unrealistic reform processes [43–45].

2.2.1. Complexity Theory

Complexity theory deals with the behavior of complex systems whose components interact in multiple ways and follow local rules, resulting in nonlinearity, collective dynamics, hierarchy, adaptation, and emergence. The parts of the system interact with each other in a nonlinear way, leading to the emergence of more complex structures and phenomena at the level of the system itself and in its interaction with other systems [44]. Emergent properties and behaviors cannot be understood by simply analyzing the system components, since they derive from higher level and emergent system properties (e.g., the social rather than the individual level). On the other hand, the basic structure of the system may be sufficiently determined by the activity of its basic components (e.g., individual consumption and spending behavior in the market, studied by microeconomics, rather than collective action or social behavior, studied by macroeconomics, industrial organization and economic sociology).

Since social systems exhibit non-linear development trajectories, small changes can lead to disproportionate effects or even phase shifts. This implies that small political or cultural changes can have significant and sometimes unexpected repercussions on social evolution, leading to the emergence of new social processes and structures in the medium to long term. Moreover, the self-organizing capacity of systems, in which patterns emerge from the interactions of agents without centralized control, may imply that social problems can be addressed collaboratively through social interaction and collective action, rather than through command-and-control, hierarchical or bureaucratic procedures. Complex systems are adaptive and resilient, able to respond to change and disruption. By maintaining a balance between the action of different parts of the system, contradictions and challenges can be effectively addressed by rebalancing processes and generating new structures [46]. In these processes of social evolution, feedback loops of cumulative causation create systemic dynamics in which individual behavior and structures in the lower strata of the system influence each other, leading to the emergence of new structures in the upper strata (one need only think of the creation of the Federal Reserve System in 1913 in the United States, which emerged from the interaction of government agencies and state banks). The outcomes can only be partially and imperfectly predicted in advance, while emerging structures and patterns often have radically new characteristics and dimensions. In some cases, the outcomes of collaborative social processes may represent solutions to problems raised in the past by the development of utopian thinking [44].

2.2.2. Social Systems Theory

Social systems theory (SST), on the other hand, focuses on the interrelationship and interconnectedness of various components within a society, which are identified as its subsystems, for example the economic, political, cultural, educational etc… [44,45]. Subsystems arise from internal differentiation and external separation from the environment in which the social system develops. SST is strictly associated with complexity theory, in the sense that complex systems are nonergodic social processes in which emergence is driven by complex feedback effects, path dependence, nonlinearity, interconnectedness, and resonance. SST, which has its roots in the general systems theory of von [47] in the 1930s, focuses on understanding processes of emergence, which involve structures that are not obtained by blueprint planning. To this end, SST analyzes the emergence of different coordination mechanisms that can accelerate and guide self-organizing dynamics [48].

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When applied to social utopias, SST highlights systemic effects rather than focusing on individual parts of the system. Utopia points to social goals and conditions that have not yet been achieved but may be achievable when the right social conditions are created or otherwise obtained over time [49–51]. SSTs can also play a discriminating role in identifying good utopias and avoiding bad ones, as the study of complex systems can help to understand why certain patterns of development are desirable in the first place and can be achieved through social evolution, while others are unlikely to occur and may be undesirable [52,53].

Social systems theory is a description of reality that can take on either the realist connotations of von Bertalanffy [47], or the self-referential and constructivist stance of Luhmann [46]. In von Bertalanffy social systems are open in their homeostatic equilibrium with the external environment, due to continuous interaction and exchange, which also defines the evolutionary pattern of their internal structure. In Luhmann [46], instead, the system is an autopoietic closed process. Autopoiesis refers to the self-referential and self-producing nature of social systems, which grow organically by reducing complexity in relation to the external environment, while producing their own internal structure and complexity through autopoietic communication flows that are recursive. Closure is a necessary characteristic of the system, since without internal recursive flows, which allow the system to reproduce itself over time, it could not differentiate itself from the external environment and would cease to exist [54–57]. The self-referential nature of system development implies that the functions of the system can come into conflict with the external social and natural environment, as when the economic system exceeds the carrying capacity of the natural environment and causes excessive depletion of natural resources, dangerous pollution, destruction of virgin forests and extinction of animal species [46,58].

In order to fulfil social functions, the system produces its own internal complexity through autopoiesis or "self-production" of internal structures, as when a democratic political state creates the judicial system to control the legislative action of parliaments, the political action of governments and the administrative action of its own bureaucracy. Over time, the functions performed by the system may come into conflict with its own structure. Internal conflict can initiate stages of reform of system structures or the creation of new structures [59]. The resolution of conflict between functions and structure leads to societal change that can be progressive or regressive, depending on the social forces, cultures and goals at play. Dysfunctional structures can be overcome through top-down directives or open-ended processes of social innovation that can be spontaneous, as in the Austrian economics approach [60–62], or consist of reforms of a more constructivist and designed kind, as in social systems theory [46]. Just think of the transition from absolutist monarchy to democratic political regimes in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Complex, self-organized systems exhibit spontaneous order and adaptation without central control, requiring decentralized decision-making, organic growth and the ability of communities to adapt and evolve in response to changing circumstances [63]. Boundaries between subsystems differentiate one system from others. Even so, they are "porous," allowing for interpenetration, cross-fertilization, coupling, and interlocking dynamics, which produce feedback effects through shocks that propagate and amplify local effects across different subsystems and strata [46,57]. Communication and exchange occur transversally, although the integrity of each subsystem must also be maintained. This implies that communication between subsystems may not be steady and seamless. It can be "irritative," as each subsystem is forced to preserve its own mode of communication, which must be adapted to the mode of communication of other systems (e.g., communications between the political and judicial systems) [46,59,64].

In this theoretical milieu, social utopias may point to multiple pathways and diverse approaches to achieve desirable social ends informed by social progress, as systemic evolution may favor (but also hinder) the fulfillment of functions that are aligned with utopian goals, and the emergence of new structures that support such evolutionary processes. In particular, self-organization and adaptability of new structures, e.g., new organizational forms or new governance structures, are explored to achieve relevant societal goals [65]. The interaction between individual behavior, collective action, organization and social structures is complex and unpredictable but creates ever-

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renewing evolutionary processes within existing systems. Complexity and the interdependence of various subsystems within a society require a holistic understanding of social phenomena. In contrast, methodological individualism and reductionism are likely to be incompatible with a constructivist approach to social progress, since they analyze human behavior and motivations narrowly and impose too strict assumptions on human interactions, thus ending up analyzing only elementary and standardized problems (e.g., supply and demand and market equilibrium) [66,67].

Social systems theory offers a normative view of the intricate dynamics of intersecting subsystems in the direction suggested by social utopias since even small changes in system dynamics can affect the overall stability, adaptability, and functionality of the overall system. Through nonlinear evolutionary pathways, a utopian society is likely to develop on its own terms, introducing norms, evolving values, and using communication channels and social props (e.g., organizations) to build its own structures and culture, achieving self-maintenance, adaptability, and differentiation from other social systems [68,69]. By emphasizing the complexity, interconnectedness, and emergent properties of social systems, both complexity theory and social systems theory provide frameworks for understanding the dynamics, organization, and sustainability of once-utopian social reforms [49–51].

2.2.3. An Example: John Rawls's Realist Utopia

As a partial and very tentative application of the theories just discussed, John Rawls' [6–9] theory of justice as fairness in political philosophy can be considered one of the most notable examples of "realist progressive utopianism". Discussion of such an eminent case can then contribute to a more informed discussion of the Great Reset as one of the most recent cases of realist utopianism.

John Rawls, one of the most prominent political philosophers of the 20th century, introduced several key concepts in his works, especially in his seminal book "A Theory of Justice" [6]. The difference principle is one of the two principles of justice proposed by the author and follows lexicographically the first principle of "equality of opportunity", which refers to the equal freedom of every citizen to enjoy the broadest basic freedoms compatible with similar freedoms for others. The difference principle states that social and economic inequalities should be organized in such a way as to benefit the least advantaged members of society the most. By allowing for inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income, but only if these inequalities benefit the least advantaged, the difference principle seeks to ensure that the structure of society does not unfairly favor the best-off and provides opportunities for all individuals to improve their social and economic standing.

The maximin criterion is a decision rule used in the original position, a hypothetical situation designed to ensure fairness and impartiality, as individuals choose the principles of justice behind a "veil of ignorance". In the original position, citizens are unaware of their own place in society (their class, heritage, social status, intelligence, strength, etc.). In game theory, the maximin strategy pretends that the worst strategic combination of payoffs is the best possible outcome and consists of choosing the option that maximizes the minimum profit. This strategy embodies the difference principle because it ensures that inequalities in society are minimized and improves the situation of the most disadvantaged. As an example of the application of the difference principle and the maximin criterion, one can consider the fact that skilled and more productive workers tend to earn higher wages than other workers. This distributive pattern may increase income inequality in society, but it is not incompatible with the application of Rawls' difference principle, since skilled workers also increase the total productivity of the factors of production and thus the total value added produced by all workers in society, including the less productive ones. Thus, skilled workers improve the economic condition of less skilled workers by allowing them to earn higher wages or otherwise increase their income, according to the maximin criterion, despite their lower productivity.

In the book "The Law of Peoples", the principles of justice as fairness were defined by Rawls himself as a "realistic utopia", a concept that envisages an ideal society realizable in practice in which the difference principle is applied both in domestic politics of income and wealth distribution, and in international relations between different peoples adopting tolerance as a fundamental principle of equity and reciprocity. According to Rawls, the utopia of a just social order (national and

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international) is realistic because it is based on the conditions of human nature in the original position under the veil of ignorance, even if it aspires to embody abstract principles of justice. Although utopian ideals should guide human aspirations, they must be tempered by what is realistically possible given human nature and social conditions. In Rawls' realistic utopia a just society is understood to be both idealistic and attainable. It provides the overall vision of a feasible but ideal society, respectful of fundamental rights and freedoms, in which justice is practiced as fairness [10–12,70,71].

In Rawls' system of democratic equality, which replaces the liberal equality of rights, for example as in the political philosophy of Nozick (1970), the democratic criterion of citizens' choice under the veil of ignorance would lead society to distribute its economic surplus following the maximin rule and not the maximization of the sum total of citizens' utilities as in the utilitarian tradition of Jeremy Bentham (1780) and John Harsanyi (1976). The distribution of economic value added would be more equitable than what is usually observed in capitalist market economies.

From the point of view of the theories presented above, critical realism and the theory of complex systems, it can be affirmed that Rawls' theory of justice, embodied in the difference principle and the maximin criterion, can be understood as a normative criterion that, in principle, can be realistic for democratic equality when it is chosen by free and equal citizens in the original position under the veil of ignorance [72,73].

Rawls' abstract principles of justice can be defended on the basis of democratic freedoms, which can effectively sustain a tendency to improve the conditions of the disadvantaged. Although citizens do not choose under the veil of ignorance and may be influenced by vested interests and cultural ideologies, the normative criteria expounded by Rawls can substantially influence political choices and economic policy. In this sense, Rawls' principles of justice represent a realistic attempt to apply utopian principles of equitable distribution to real societies. The utopian character of Rawls' theory can be recognized not in the political will, but in the form of its application, since capitalist economies are characterized by strong concentration of wealth, economic power and inequality. The institutional configuration of social structures and of the economy can predetermine outcomes in a manner contrary to Rawls' criteria of justice. The main difficulty lies in the distributive patterns that characterize real economies, especially in capitalist corporations, and through market exchanges. Redistribution of resources through the tax system may partially help to reduce distributive injustice, but it is unlikely to solve it as the difference principle would require. This lack of applicability and realizability may reduce the realism of Rawls' theory, relegating it to the realm of unrealizable utopias. Despite these limitations, Rawls' criteria are still considered useful today as "pole stars" or normative criteria that can guide social and fiscal policy [70,71].

3. The Great Reset as Realist Utopia. A Critical Stance

The importance of using complexity theory and social systems theory to evaluate Great Reset as a realistic utopia derives from the impossibility, when dealing with utopias, of making simplified and standardized assumptions about the underlying mechanisms governing social reality and extrapolating reform processes and the resulting outcomes from such assumptions, as orthodox economics, for example, is wont to do. On the contrary, reform processes require abandoning all assumptions and starting afresh with ever-new and emerging hypotheses about individual rationality and behavior, collective action, institutionalization, and the holistic functioning of social systems in their actual historical development, which is characterized by path dependence and non-ergodicity. In this sense, the theory of complex social systems is clearly more appropriate than orthodox social theorizing, since the creation of new hypotheses and the study of emergence, self-organization, and nonlinear evolution, i.e., autopoiesis of social systems, are at the core of the study of complex systems [48,63,74].

In the case of the Great Reset, the argument of this paper is that while the work of Schwab and Malleret [1] clearly rejects the basic tenets of orthodox economic theorizing and argues for more focus on stakeholder capitalism rather than shareholder capitalism, participatory governance rather than exclusive governance, and sustainable development rather than traditional development models

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based on overexploitation of resources, it does not focus enough on the structural features of past social and economic development to foresee possible future directions of reform effectively. The main weakness of the project lies precisely in its inability to look at the complexity of the system, focusing instead on short-term, often fiscal, interventions that would have the capacity, in the desiderata of the project's drafters, to radically change the course of social evolution through social, environmental and fiscal reforms, when in fact the structural features of the social system and its interaction with the environment are, certainly in the short term, essentially unchanged and not amenable to hard and fast reform processes.

The social ontology introduced by critical realism highlights the need to understand and follow the deep patterns of social change in the long run, regardless of the manifestation of catastrophic events such as wars, pandemics or potentially catastrophic processes such as the climate crisis. These events may interact with change, accelerate or halt it, and contribute to different directions of change processes, but they are unlikely to determine change when the system itself is not capable of producing its own tools (e.g., new governance structures and organizational forms) for change. Structural social reform requires the initiation of long-term processes of cultural evolution, technological innovation and then institutional reform, which can only be achieved through a prolonged deliberative democratic process (or even through dictatorial decisions and policy measures, which, however, this paper does not consider). Social change and institutional reform are characterized by bidirectional processes of cumulative causation, in which the feedback mechanisms of change interact with existing structures and may give rise to new structures. Over time, new cultures, organizational forms, and governance structures may emerge that lead to the desired improvements. One need only think of the adoption of renewable energy techniques, which for several decades were largely considered insufficient for the transition to a net zero carbon economy, but which has accelerated exponentially in recent years thanks mainly to technological innovation in materials science, economies of scale and lower production costs [75].

Constructivist approaches to social systems theory, such as Luhmann's [46], can help to understand why simplified, ready-made policy measures are more likely to be ineffective and to fail in predictions and goals. Such measures do not induce any structural change because they do not create any new systemic pattern or reproduction mechanism. On the contrary, they may damage the existing modes of operation of the system. The same constructivist approaches strives to explain how change can be sustained in the medium to long term. For example, through the creation of appropriate socio-technological ecosystems, where dedicated research projects can lead to social and technological innovations that can actually help sustain structural change in the desired direction [75]. These reflections confirm that the study of complex systems is one of the most effective theoretical pathways for envisioning change that also includes deep structures, culture, and institutional environments.

3.1. The Great Reset as Reform Project

When the goal is to envision a reform process, the contradictions, anomalies and paradoxes that afflict contemporary societies can be seen as heuristic clues that are used to develop new and emergent utopian thinking and then policy advice and prescription, similar to the application of Rawls' criteria of justice as fairness to real-world individual and collective behavior. A speculative theoretical framework may, in principle, end up expounding policy implications and prescriptions that are workable and effective, but only when such policy advice takes into account the deep patterns and structures of societal development and the functions they are intended to assume. Such prescriptions must first respect Rawls's first principle of justice, i.e., equal liberty for all (in this regard, see John Harsanyi's critical stance on the libertarian implications of Rawls's theory of justice [76]) and then address the problem of equitable distribution of resources. In a similar vein, a project like the Great Reset would need to first protect basic individual freedom and then produce police advice that address the pressing issues of social, economic and environmental sustainability. In this sense, the Great Reset project has shown some potential for providing effective policy advice. However, as noted, it also appears to be plagued by serious weaknesses and shortcomings.

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While it may be considered physiological that the overwhelming problems facing contemporary societies should give rise to proposals for social and economic reform, the Great Reset program runs into problems when it attempts to pass the test of complexity theory and social systems theory. COVID-19 undoubtedly exacerbated the problems and contradictions facing contemporary societies. However, insufficient attention is paid to the fact that these problems and contradictions have not been created by the pandemic itself, but were already present beforehand. Problems strictly related to the outbreak of the pandemic, such as the health crisis, have largely been overcome since the disappearance of the infection, and unemployment is now at historic lows, which may prove that some predictions of the advocates of The Great Reset regarding the economic crisis and unemployment are indeed ill-conceived (although a severe economic recession cannot be completely ruled out soon). On the other hand, problems afflicting the environment or human societies that were already present before the pandemic hardly changed after it. This implies that the changes needed to heal some deep problems such as income and wealth inequality and the climate crisis require structural measures unrelated to the COVID-19 outbreak. As an example, let us consider the measures being tried to heal the climate crisis, such as the switch from internal combustion cars to electric cars and restrictions on car use in urban areas. These measures, appreciated by most Great Reset advocates, proved to be partly ineffective, too restrictive, and provoked serious social unrest such as the cases of the gilets jaunes in France in 2018 and the invasion of tractors across Europe in 2024 [77].

It can be said that the Great Reset fails the test of a realizable utopia, even if it was conceived as such. The main reason for the failure lies in the lack of attention paid to the historical trends and complex evolutionary patterns that characterize both developed and developing economies, their structural features and their capacity to change and adapt over time. While the proposed measures are often characterized by the imposition of restrictive rules, the adaptation of a complex system would instead require positive, proactive and innovative measures that can support structural change in the long run, not short sighted restrictive regulation. Economies of scale in the production of new technologies for the green transition are an obvious example of how green investments can support the shift to renewables, without necessarily the costs of production or reducing energy consumption. A second example comes from the development of the circular economy, which can serve to reduce the over-extraction and exploitation of raw materials and minerals through reuse, recycling and reutilization of spare parts and materials in industrial processes. As for economic inequalities, there is no easy solution in sight, apart from the imposition of progressive taxation, since this problem, as pointed out by leading analysts, has characterized capitalist economies since their beginnings after the industrial revolution in England [26,27]. However, the evolution of company law, labor relations and employment contracts, new and more inclusive forms of ownership, governance and organization may lead, in the long run, to the emergence of new organizational solutions that support a fairer distribution of income among different social groups (as has been the case with the introduction of co-determination or mitbestimmung in Germany after World War II). These changes may be consistent with Schwab and Malleret's [1] proposal for a "stakeholder economy" to replace the dominant "shareholder economy." However, contrary to its desire to see a paradigm shift soon, this paper suggests that structural socio-economic changes leading to a more equitable distribution of income and wealth must be carefully regulated at the microeconomic level and can only be part of the long-term evolution of institutions, which is not amenable to simplified, hard and fast solutions.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper aims to analyze the World Economic Forum's Great Reset program as an example of a realistic utopia that emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The exceptional situation created by the health emergency, the economic crisis and the spread of unemployment created an opportunity to tackle in a new and radical way a number of social, economic, health and environmental issues considered urgent - especially the risk of new health emergencies, ecological transitions and the growth of inequality - but which have not yet been satisfactorily addressed. The

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Great Reset program has been proposing a revision of several fundamental elements of contemporary capitalist systems, advocating "stakeholder capitalism" in place of "shareholder capitalism," multi-stakeholder governance of economic policies involving diverse social groups and local communities, and environmental sustainability of economic processes. Opponents of the Great Reset [78] have highlighted, instead, the increased social control that would be required to implement the program and the numerous restrictive measures that would be necessary, including increased health, social and digital controls, and the imposition of restrictive measures on mobility and transportation to achieve a rapid shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy. New vaccination campaigns could be necessary, leading to new needs and opportunities for human testing of new but potentially dangerous drugs and vaccines.

This contribution has not so much focused on criticizing the specific proposals put forward by the Great Reset program as on pointing out its weaknesses, both theoretically and in terms of policy advice and prescription. Some general analogy with the application of Rawls' principles of justice as fairness (especially the difference principle) has been drawn and discussed in the previous section. In the approach followed in this paper, from a theoretical point of view, it has become clear that the Great Reset, as a specific instance of "realistic utopia", suffers from an inability to focus on deep structural elements of social and economic evolution. The proposal of restrictive measures to achieve valuable ends points to a difficulty in devising positive and proactive incentive systems, or a governance structure that can induce change, without increasing control, restricting economic action and limiting the freedom of citizens. This weakness has clearly manifested itself in the inability to foresee the macro consequences of the pandemic, which was identified as a fundamental starting point and a triggering event for epochal change. In reality, apart from the short-lived period of health emergency and economic crisis, little has changed in the configuration of society since 2020, apart from the unexpected resurgence of inflationary pressures in the 2021-2023 period and other significant developments such as the substantially increased presence of smart work and work-from-home in the labor market. Deep structural trends have been especially related to technological innovation (e.g., the contagious spread of artificial intelligence and robotics), ecological transitions (e.g., the exponential growth of renewable energy production and the growth of the circular economy) and other organizational changes in society (e.g., the growth of work-from-home and smart work). However, these trends have been accelerated, not created by COVID-19, and were already well underway before it. In other words, the pandemic has been a moderator of innovation, not its driver. In fact, even these technological and organizational changes were not adequately predicted in the 2020 Great Reset manifesto [1].

The scant attention paid to the historical evolution of deep social structures, whose analysis requires sound theoretical paradigms, such as critical realism, and the theory of complex systems, led to an overly optimistic and prescriptive approach to short-term policy measures, such as the forced transition to electric mobility, which has not occurred to date, neglecting long-term structural perspectives, which have to do with the evolution of industrial systems, urban regeneration projects, the development of the circular economy, and of new organizational forms (e. e.g., the recent emergence of the B-Corp and the benefit corporation as tools to improve social and ecological sustainability [79]) and governance structures based on the inclusion of different stakeholders. This contribution has used critical realism and complex systems theory to propose a longer-term and more organic perspective, in which social, institutional and technological change is not impossible, but should be studied at the micro level in terms of generation of innovation and cultural and institutional change as a basis for better adaptation to deteriorating social, economic and environmental conditions.

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