

EDITORIALE

LEADER

by

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THE LONG BLACK SWAN

A “black swan” means a rare event or a chain of events that challenges prior expectations and knowledge and has a strong impact and long-term consequences on society.

In the leader article of issue 2/23 of this journal, I stressed that 2024 would be a crucial year, given the elections planned in many countries. This topic was, among others, widely debated during the World Economic Forum in January 2024. In this regard, I would like to quote a passage from the above-mentioned leader: These 2024 global elections will be pivotal to humankind, as they may entail many risks for future geopolitical orders and for a number of crucial aspects: conflicts, future alliances, environmental policies, and economic crises. This is why it is fair to refer to a turning point for our planet in the next two or three years, apart from and well beyond natural disasters alone.

Unfortunately, it was an easy statement to make. I feel that the negative impact of the shifts in governments and administrations that have occurred since the 2024 elections is only the last link in a long chain of crises. The first was the bursting of the real estate bubble in 2006 and the subsequent collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008; the second was the Covid pandemic in 2020; the third, the saddest one, pricking our conscience every day, is represented by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the destruction of Gaza after the massacre of 7 October 2023. This series of events has resulted in a systemic crisis, unlike any in the past 80 years, *i.e.* since the end of the Second World War. This is why I have entitled this leader article “The Long Black Swan”. Authoritative experts, such as Adam Tooze from Columbia University, have already delved into these recent crises (polycrises). Thus, I will not dwell on specific analyses here.

The only geopolitical consideration that I would like to add is that this systemic crisis is certainly even more severe if we consider the current political, economic, and commercial relations between the EU and the US. On our side of the Atlantic, the 2024 elections confirmed the top leadership of the European Commission; actually, the Commission has weakened, and the composition of its majority has become even more fragmented. On the other

side of the Atlantic, Trump’s return to the White House has been causing a political earthquake. The crisis between the two partners (EU and US) is unfolding in a global context where international equilibria, political and military alliances, multilateral and bilateral economic relations, and international organisations have been turned upside down in a matter of few months, leaving a climate of general uncertainty, which has become the hallmark of our time.

Amid this general uncertainty, only a handful of elements appear to be certain and, unfortunately, they are of a bleak nature. I do not mean the ongoing wars and atrocities inflicted upon defenceless civilian populations – horrors that we have observed for years now, burdened by a deep and persistent sense of helplessness. These are issues that do not fall within the scope of this journal. However, I would like to refer to two equally prominent issues that have been addressed by this journal: the first concerns research, the education system, and the related medium-long term prospects; the second regards the environmental policies that involve our planet, and their repercussions.

Let us deal with the first issue. We are witnessing a concentric attack on universities and research centres, originating in the US, and unlike anything seen in recent decades. This attack is being carried out with two methods. The first is a direct assault on freedom of expression and research, with restrictions on foreign students and researchers (even those already present in research institutions) and direct cuts to funding (the case of Harvard is emblematic), often accompanied by outright blackmail. The second method entails an inevitable reduction in funding allocated to systems for identifying and recruiting future talents, a trend expected to occur globally in the coming years. This is the inevitable and sorrowful consequence of the sudden increase in military spending, imposed on and, to some extent, shared among NATO partners. In this regard, I would like to mention another leader article of this journal (“Twenty years after”, issue 1/2022). There, I referred to the NATO Advanced Research Workshops, included in the Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme and aimed at promoting dialogue and practical cooperation between NATO member states and

partner countries based on scientific research, technological innovation, and knowledge exchange. In particular, I looked back with profound regret on that period when we were presented with the unique opportunity to share views and build friendships between researchers from NATO member countries and scholars from the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact member countries.

All that world, made of hopes and forward-looking visions, aware of global complexities yet still confident, has fallen apart in just a few years. Indeed, placing restrictions on research and knowledge in order to expand war arsenals will lead to a general impoverishment of the global population, to the detriment of the most vulnerable societies.

Let us now turn to the second major issue. Another equally serious consequence of the general rearmament is that all political initiatives focused on environmental issues, including the much-cited and much-criticised “green economy”, have now fallen to the bottom of many governments’ agendas. These developments are poised to negatively affect our lives and, more

critically, those of generations to come. In this broader context, although it is extremely difficult to discern any positive signal, the academic and research community has a heightened obligation to safeguard the primacy of reason and knowledge.

To conclude this leader, I wish to highlight that our journal now has a new look and feel, complemented by a redesigned cover. As this issue marks its 20th anniversary, we have deemed it necessary to update its visual identity in line with current standards. In celebration of this milestone, the front cover of the journal features a photograph selected from the photographic calendar of Associazione Italiana di Geologia Applicata e Ambientale (AIGA, Italian association of engineering and environmental geology), for which this journal is the house organ. For this inaugural issue of our revamped journal, we are pleased to pay a well-deserved tribute to its founder, Professor Alberto Prestininzi, by publishing a recent photograph that he took in Tanzania.

I hope that you will appreciate the journal’s renewed design, and I wish you an engaging and enjoyable reading experience!