

An introduction to degrowth

The movement of degrowth considers a new model of society which would give up the infinite growth of production and consumption, and the gross domestic product (GDP), as the sine qua non of human progress. However, it does not just take the floor against growth : it is not decreasing at infinity, but up to a point where the overall ecological footprint is sustainable again ; from there, people will imagine and create a fair and truly democratic society that promises, finally, not to exceed the physical limits of the Earth. If degrowth is not voluntarily chosen, it will be the green wall that will impose, this time in pain. It is a remedy to cushion the collapse looming on the horizon (in climate, energy, agricultural, economic, financial, social, psychological, etc. domains). However, even if the ecosystem was inexhaustible, we would opt for degrowth anyway for moral and democratic reasons. The argument of the need therefore has its limits.

Degrowth appeared as such in 2002, in Lyon (France), thanks to an Adbusters association (Casseurs de pub) which popularized it, thanks to the monthly newspaper *La décroissance*. Meanwhile, it has spread in France, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium and to some extent in the UK, with the Transition Towns. Overseas, it has a long history in Quebec and is emerging in Brazil. The roots of degrowth plunge into the political ecology of the seventies, in the Meadows report "The Limits to Growth" and in the work of the heterodox economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, who developed the concept of "bio-economy". He blamed classical economics not take into account the nature factor in his calculations and leads us inexorably to entropy, that is to say the irreversible loss of matter and energy in the form of non-reusable heat. In 1972, Dennis Meadows and his team modeled the major trends of the XXI century and resulted in the conclusion of the high probability of a collapse of industrial society. When updating the report in 2012, they signed their findings persisted in advancing the date of the collapse of 2070 to 2030. With thinkers like Serge Latouche and Paul Aries, degrowth now weighs in the philosophical debate, although it does have yet acquired any political weight. This however, is not for lack of trying to structure in motion (in Belgium with the political movement objectors growth, in France with the Movement of growth objectors) or party (in France with the Party for degrowth - PPLD and the Party of growth objectors - POC). But perhaps we have historically right too soon ...

Degrowth also addresses the concept of "sustainable development" (SD) that it deems oxymoronic, inoperative, depoliticized and hypocritical. Conceptual find of the oligarchy, SD does not really trust the people or democracy to find solutions, but to a market economy, to science and technology experts. It ignores the class relations. It breaks nor with capitalism nor with productivism, but attempts to paint them in green — it's greenwashing — which meets the demands of big enterprises, including the states which are becoming more loyal belts transmission. Recently at Rio + 20, SD has turned into "green economy", presentable name of green capitalism. The "circular economy" is another mirror for the lark only distracts us from the need : to decrease faster.

As the french member of national assembly Yves Cochet said, the countdown to the collapse of industrial society has begun. The planetary hyper-Titanic struck the iceberg ecological limits for forty years ago, showed each year, among other things, by the overshoot day. However, the orchestra plays louder and humanity

dance more beautiful! To recall Freud, the pleasure principle continues to outweigh the reality principle. Degrowth has to see with catastrophism. Will the sense of catastrophe be able to mobilize the masses? Philosopher Hans Jonas bet that yes, but nothing is less certain ... The french author Alban Vétillard writes : "The decrease is as much an attempt to avoid an ecological and economic disaster, a preparation in anticipation of the same disaster and a positive transition of the society, even if the feared catastrophe does not occur".

Degrowth reflects both the political choice — "the decline will be accepted and expected" — and material stress — "or it will be realized." Ideologically, there is no reason to stop pressing the accelerator; at the same time, emergency braking and finding a lot of alternatives is a matter of survival. Humanity will always be subservient to the biosphere. Philosopher Vittorio Hösle reminds us that the organic world is an ontological sphere in itself. Whatever proactive and Promethean accents of human beings — they come from free trade, neo-Marxist or transhumanists — we are all "condemned" to deal with the ecosystems.

Several key concepts determine Degrowth : the open relocation of the economy and politics, the inventory on theological and philosophical heritage that has shaped our modernity, the sense of limits, the reduction of social inequalities and working time, and so on. Degrowth walks on three "legs":

- An individual approach called "voluntary simplicity"; it is less difficult to implement, since it only depends on the free will of individuals. However, it is limited in scope;
- Alternative social experiments such as solidarity purchasing groups, local exchange services, local and complementary currencies, Repair's Cafes, collective urban gardens, and so on ;
- Action in the political sphere, whether through elections or not.

To fix ideas, let's remember that :

- Degrowth is sustainable to face collapse and crises. This is not a failed growth.
- Degrowth is democratic. The reorganization of the society, to avoid that restructuring excludes anyone, yet requires more direct democracy.
- Degrowth is ecological, social, cultural. Physical and economic decline must give way to many other qualitative changes : social relations disinterested profit, slow, time for oneself and for others, fairness, warmth, preventive approach to health, new respectful relationship with nature, true existential security, artistic creativity, perception of what surrounds us, poetry, empathy, and this in greater cultural variety.
- Degrowth is fair. It applies primarily to the 20% favored in this world, living mainly in industrialized countries, but concerns everyone when it comes to change our thoughts, related to consumer and production-oriented models. It is different of a decrease in industrialized countries to move towards a more fair society in these countries, and this world.
- Degrowth is innovative. This is a challenge to change a system — made especially for highways, nuclear power, nanotechnology and synthetic biology — for a system based on reduced consumption of resources, in which innovation and productive activities have integrated the concept of limit, rather than trying to avoid it.
- Degrowth is balanced. To prevent crises, it adjusts simultaneously reducing consumption, reducing production and sharing (including labor), so that no one is excluded.
- Degrowth is diverse. Its purpose is to achieve a sustainable society where

lifestyles are unique, while potentially generalizable and sharable in the perspective established by philosopher Emmanuel Kant.

- Degrowth provides a comprehensive reflection and a local scope. It is based on an open relocation of the economy, but is measured at a global level. In this respect, a local degrowth implying growth elsewhere or in the future is not degrowth.

Let's talk about the connotation of the term degrowth that scares so many people. Is it positive or negative? Both!

- Positive in that it carries a livable and desirable future for all; it also appears as an antidote: when a flood has destroyed everything, we look forward to the recession of it; when infection reaches us, we look disinfection, and so on.

- Negative, because it impedes the almighty pleasure principle that governs the modern liberal societies. All is not possible or feasible in this world, must we endlessly repeat to our contemporaries. We'll have to accept willy-nilly some forms of back, and even going back on the modern comforts in different areas : personal mobility, new technologies, power tools, some services such as long distance tourism. Given the urgency of the situation (see the latest IPCC report), nothing says it will be enough to save us the wall. In any case we shall take a moral position, which remains one of the most tangible signs of our humanity.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald wrote : "We should be able to understand that the present situation is hopeless, and nevertheless be determined to change them".

This moral position, however, must constantly take into consideration the results of scientific research, as philosopher Hans Jonas invited. We also expect to return to work the land in large numbers in the coming decades, given the depletion of fossils. What appears to be a curse for *homo consumens* may be an opportunity for a new pact with nature and a return to the fundamentals of our condition of higher mammals required to produce their food themselves.

A society of "good life" is not to be confused with a society with physical facility, permitted by the famous energy slaves that brought us oil, and its depletion will soon withdraw. It should be compatible with a value such as a sense of duty and effort, that we see as outdated and draconian. I do not know to what extent the degrowth society will be a society of good life; I know where the current mad race to growth leads us : in the generalized barbarism. So the choice is quickly made!

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