

## Summary

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**Keywords:** degrowth; energy; La Fontaine’s fables.

## 1. Introduction

### About the motivation for the topic of degrowth

In the early 1970s the physical limits of the planet facing the population growth began to be questioned. Since then, ideas about an inevitable limit to the flow of physical material and human growth on the planet, started to appear. Economists and physicists then spoke of the need for a stable or steady state of the population and economic activities [1] and even a degrowth state, according to the most radical or lucid [2]. However, it is still common to assume and accept that our well-being, and even happiness, increase as our economic power and our access to - and use of - energy growth. Indeed, some indicators such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and the Human Development Index (HDI) may appear to be correlated. Table 1 shows the values of these two indices for major emerging countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and most recently South Africa - or BRICS) and some developed countries aiming at establishing a comparison. Energy consumption data per capita, accompanying GDP growth, seem to support the idea that both energy consumption and high GDP lead to a better quality of life.

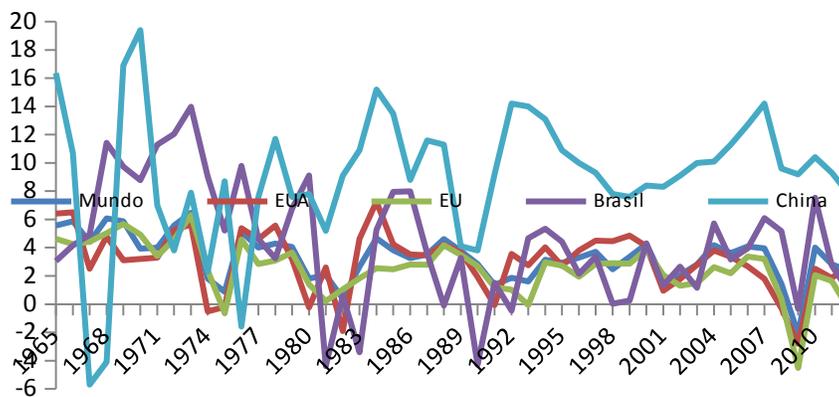
Table 1 - GDP per capita (2008) and HDI (2012) of BRICS and other developed countries.

	<b>GDP per capita (World Bank) (US\$ (2008))</b>	<b>HDI (UN) (estimated 2012)</b>
<b>United States of America</b>	46.716	0,937

<b>Germany</b>	44.471	0,920
<b>France</b>	45.982	0,893
<b>United Kingdom</b>	43.089	0,875
<b>Russia</b>	11.339	0,788
<b>Brazil</b>	8.400	0,730
<b>China</b>	3.264	0,554
<b>South Africa</b>	5.685	0,629
<b>India</b>	1.068	0,554

Source: Own elaboration from Wikipedia data<sup>1</sup>

More recently, the first signs of slowing growth or even negative growth in GDPs began to appear in the abovementioned developed countries. There are discussions about a passing crisis, but the trend seems to point at a sustained reduction of the GDP growth. Figure 1 shows GDP growth in Brazil and the main blocs of the world (European Union, United States of America, China and the World as a whole).



<sup>1</sup> Available at: [http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Lista\\_de\\_pa%C3%ADses\\_por\\_PIB\\_nominal\\_per\\_capita](http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Lista_de_pa%C3%ADses_por_PIB_nominal_per_capita) and [http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Lista\\_de\\_pa%C3%ADses\\_por\\_%C3%8Dndice\\_de\\_Desenvolvimento\\_Humano](http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Lista_de_pa%C3%ADses_por_%C3%8Dndice_de_Desenvolvimento_Humano). Accessed on 13/01/2014

Figure 1 - GDP Growth (%) by year, 1965-2012  
Source: Own elaboration from World Bank data<sup>2</sup>

The economic-growth society, merely focused on economic well-being is not only showing its first signs of exhaustion of the growth of certain activities and the generation of "wealth", but it is also not achieving the goal proclaimed by modernity, the one about the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

"In the nineteenth century - Jacques Ellul notes - happiness is essentially linked to the welfare obtained by using mechanical, industrial media, and thanks to the production. [...] This picture of happiness made us move on to a consumer society. Now that we have experienced that consume does not buy bring happiness, we go through a crisis of values." [3]

Going back to the topic that motivates me and for which we began our conversation, the criticisms raised by degrowth flourish in this direction. Some bright intellectuals, mostly Europeans, now lead the discussions around these proposals. Although they consistently try to disseminate them, there is still difficult to convince a wider audience, which is numbed by the religion of economic growth that rules the world today. These proposals deserve to be considered not only by countries that reach a level of a "saturated" development, as it is the case of the so-called old western European countries, but also for countries that are still in a growing phase. For these countries, the implementation of such proposals could prevent future negative effects and avoid a recession. It is the feeling that will lead my research in the next years. Initially, I will present the theory of degrowth on the energy issue, since it is the niche of the initial proposals [2].

### **About the spontaneous use of fables**

Being a literary genre that uses animal metaphors to parody human characteristics, the fable can be an effective mean to communicate messages, with humour, to the general public and spread "moral lessons" across society. In previous times, fables were in fact, ways of transmitting and disseminating thoughts we might call philosophical: most of the work of famous and recent fabulists as Jean de La Fontaine was inspired by Greek poets, like Aesop, Horace and Phaedrus. Although it may be ambitious, the objective of this article proposes testing the fable as a genre to pass on concepts and fundamental hypothesis about sustainability studies and help the reader to reflect.

Three fables were used as an inspiration to illustrate the following acts. The first one is *The Ox and the Frog*, to show the absurdness of pursuing unlimited growth. The second fable chosen was *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, to exemplify by analogy, the limits of the capitalist-consumerist model, imposed as the hegemonic model. Finally *The Tortoise and the Hare* inspired the third part of the text, exposing the advantages of a less accelerated lifestyle (including transport) that is not stuck in unsustainable energy patterns.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://donnees.banquemondiale.org>, Accessed on 13/01/2014.

Let's follow the pilgrimage of our protagonist – the curious and naughty hummingbird – and discover with him who were the major thinkers of degrowth theory and their approach to energy standards.

## **2. The awakening of the hummingbird: a fable in three acts**

### **Act One: The hummingbird and the chicken**

A hummingbird and craved fat kid,  
Envious of the round chicken and the lovely peacock.  
Decided to get inform and wanted to take hormones.  
At the Club of Rome [4], a specialist was consulted.  
The specialist, surprised, said to the interrogator:  
"Why do you want to get bigger and change?  
Biologists and economists<sup>3</sup> [5] have shown  
That we should live respecting the biosphere.  
She embraces us all,  
Imposes its laws and reacts with force  
When they are violated without control.  
As Georgescu-Roegen said [6] and so other men of good sense,  
For a simple matter of physics, or rather of thermodynamics,  
There won't be infinite growth in a finite world!  
Likewise, you cannot get as big as you want,  
Absorbing so much medicine would only get you denaturalised.  
Nor would it be an advantage for you, think about it:  
How could your wings support you?  
And how would you choose what flowers to visit?  
Nature is perfectly made; it is not worth fighting it,  
Grow just to grow, does not make sense,  
Nor, as announced by Furtado, development brings." [7]

Slightly frustrated and stunned with this information, our little bird decides to follow his explorer path. Stumbles upon Mrs Grasshopper, a home-loving smiling friend who cleans in front of his house.

### **Act Two : The hummingbird and the grasshopper**

" – Hello Mrs Grasshopper,  
They told me that in abundance and luxury you lived singing,  
And I wanted to picture myself with the same feeling,  
But I find you working, was I misinformed?  
- Well my friend, for living that way I now suffer the punishment.

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<sup>3</sup> There was a stream of economists in the late seventies, inspired by biology, made analogy between natural and economic mechanisms to try to highlight the risks that humans want to run totally unrelated economic laws impose natural limits of the biosphere (see René Passet , 1979).

Of many goods I filled my house, but they didn't last long;  
 Their obsolescence was intentional, and cost me so much, it was wrong.  
 To be able to survive the wave, I decided to imitate my cousin ant,  
 But quickly I was taken by the system,  
 And like the bees fable, by the work I got crushed [8]:  
 I felt disgusted and worn out by the overload of work!  
 Mészáros and his peers are right, these patterns need to be revised [9, 10],  
 Both consumption and production!  
 We can enjoy life in friendliness, joy and soberness,  
 Sharing our goods with others and consuming moderately,  
 But never giving up our autonomy! [11, 12]  
 Our relationship with work should also be reviewed:  
 We should not neglect our leisure time. [6, 13]  
 - But developed countries enjoyed without worrying...  
 Couldn't we consume without restriction now?  
 - That is what it seems, my dear, "the Western culture only remains  
 By the desire of the rest of the world to have access to it" [14]  
 It is the fruit of our imagination, we have to decolonise it! [15]  
 And as with the territory, our culture we must recover,  
 And the virtuous circle begins to deploy:  
 Rethinking, reducing, and especially resisting <sup>4</sup>[12]  
 To choose our own model of development,  
 And according to local characteristics and capabilities,  
 Choose the most suitable energy system. "

The hummingbird increasingly perplexed, stared thoughtfully at the horizon. Mrs Grasshopper advised him to go see the "wise snail", only a few trees from there. So our curious little bird went on his way.

### **Act Three: The hummingbird and the snail**

"- Snail Master, how are you? I was sent to consult you,  
 But wanted to be advised about speed...  
 The wrong door I must have hit, I apologize for the inconvenience.  
 - No son, you are in the right place, from the race with the hare I came out victorious.  
 I will also teach you that *chi va piano va sano va e va lontano*.  
 Look at me: my shell is the right size:  
 It protects me without getting in my way.  
 Now, you, my friend: why do you beat your wings so fast?  
 You spend a lot of energy; it will cost you to replace it!  
 Allow me to give you some tips, which in the future you will value:  
 Georgescu-Roegen spoke of a "minimal bioeconomic programme" some time ago,  
 It called to use solar energy directly, and avoid all waste ,

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<sup>4</sup> Refers to the virtuous circle into eight "R" serene decrease proposed by Serge Latouche: reevaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, reallocate, reduce, reuse / recycle, whose "R" key, central, contained in the other, would be: resist. (Latouche, S. 2007. Pp. 56-71)

Also promoted organic agriculture, and manufacturing durable and serviceable goods. [16]  
The ecologist Odum, in the same line, created a method of energy evaluation<sup>5</sup>. [17]  
And Illich analysed thoroughly the limit of the most convenient use of energy,  
Told us to avoid "radical monopolies" like cars, [18]  
Which counterproductively end up by subjecting a lot,  
Testimony of a modernity that brought technical progress,  
But did not know how to prevent some perverse effects. [19]  
Why would you produce even more powerful engines,  
If they reach excessive speeds and cause accidents?  
Break free from the diktat of efficiency, and opt for frugal abundance, [20]  
Without risking a general blackout, which could lead to a global conflict." [21]

### **3. Final considerations**

The possibility of progressing on sustainability issues depends less on technical solutions, such as eco-efficiency, and more on a cultural change. Therefore, it is crucial to clearly communicate environmental and social concepts to reach the majority of the society and raise awareness. It was because of the latter that I opted to use a fable to present the literature consulted, summarized in Figure 2. I hope that you enjoyed the hummingbird tale, and to have reached a wide audience, from specialised readers, to those who are familiar with the topic, and those who are just plain curious. The idea was to facilitate the assimilation of concepts related to degrowth by using a fable, rather than presenting the information in a technical format.

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<sup>5</sup> Quantifying solar equivalent joules (sej) the built-in solar power in the entity / product in question. Measurement of solar, directly and indirectly contained in a product or service energy. Were developed (and continue to be updated) conversion (transformities) tables to make equivalences between one unit of product / service considered and its content sej.

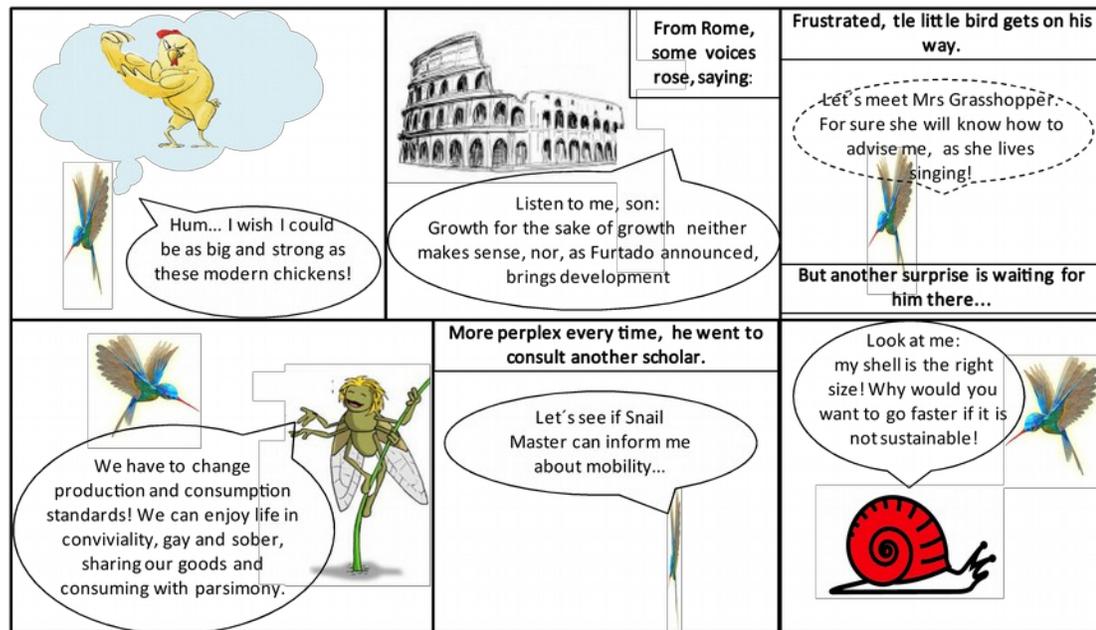


Figure 2 - The awakening of the hummingbird: fable about the proposal of degrowth.

Note that the snail was not chosen by chance to complete this story: it is the symbol of the “degrowth movement” and the so-called “growth protesters” As stressed by Serge Latouche citing Ivan Illich [12], it would be good to get inspired by the wisdom of the snail, who teaches us not only the much necessary slowness, but also another lesson:

The snail builds the delicate architecture of its shell by adding spirals one after another, with increasingly wider turns and then ceases abruptly before it starts to decrease the windings. This is because one more single loop would produce a shell sixteen times larger. Instead of contributing to the welfare of the animal, the shell would burden it. Thereafter, any increase in productivity would only serve to alleviate the difficulties created by this increase in the size of the shell beyond the limits set by its purpose. Beyond the point of no enlargement of the spirals, the problems of excessive growth multiply exponentially, while the biological capacity of the snail can only, in the best scenario, follow an arithmetic progression (Illich, 2005, p. 292 *apud* LATOUCHE 2007 [12], p.41).

The hummingbird was also not chosen by chance: it can be considered a symbol of Brazil, regardless of the fact that the Rufous-bellied Thrush (“sabiá-laranjeira”, in Portuguese) was officially named the symbol bird of the country in 2002<sup>6</sup>. The aim was to focus on Brazil, as a sample of the so-called developing countries with strong potential, the BRICS. This country, where I chose to live, is one of the many countries around Latin America, Asia, East Europe and Africa that suffer the effects of a development considered late and imposed by the so-called developed countries.

<sup>6</sup> Decree published in the Official Gazette, Brazil, on 04/10/2002. Provides for the “Day of the Bird” and other measures. 04/10/2002.

In fact, my research is motivated by the desire to understand how these countries, now growing and hopefully developing, envision its potential and need for growth. Will they adopt this religion of growth? Or is there still time to opt for a development model based on different values? The following steps of my research will intend to examine and investigate the potential for acceptance of the values conveyed by the proposal of degrowth in Brazil and consequently assess if such proposal can be adopted by developed and developing countries. This article represents the beginning of my journey. It allowed me to list the main defenders of the degrowth movement and link them with the energy issue, which was one of the reasons that originated such line of thought.

At a time when the snail is both a symbol of the degrowth international movement and the starring character nicknamed Turbo, in national cinemas [22]; when some are considering privatising the sun [23], when sales of new cars are subsidised by public funds to maintain the balance of market forces in favour of private companies, while in detriment of citizens' autonomy, it might be worth noticing the contradictions of our cultural and energy patterns and to start considering alternative routes, such as those proposed by precursors and members of the degrowth movement. Despite the negative and intentionally provocative name, degrowth includes constructive and optimistic criticism and promises that seem realistic for developing countries.

As André Gorz said once in 1975, "Utopia nowadays, does not mean advocating for well-being through degrowth, or promoting the subversion of the current way of life; Utopia does mean believing that the growth of the social product can still bring well-being and that it is physically possible " [24].

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