

Leipzig Degrowth conference

Open-localism

François Schneider & Filka Sekulova, Research & Degrowth

Short Abstract

The so-called “open-growth-society”, related to globalisation, has only been open for a few: the rich ones, and for the products from multinationals. Criticizing globalisation, worse promoting degrowth, leads very quickly to accusations of being reactionary. In practice now growth and globalisation in this finite world leads to increasing inequality and therefore – frustration, closures (the rise of extreme rights), and conflicts for resources. Localism, if it is about being in relation with our surrounding environment, does not need to be closed. Within degrowth we talk about the importance of supporting, practicing and theorizing the so-called “open-localism”, or “cosmopolitan localism”. Open-localism does not create frontiers, and cherishes diversity locally.. It implies reducing the distance between consumer and producers (or be “consumers-producers”), being sensitive to what we can see and feel, while being cosmopolitan, in line with the antic citizen of the world Diogenes. Rather than building an identity it implies means acting in coherence, and certainly not given by consumer products, or exclusion.

Long Abstract

Gated communities, people closing doors, fear of foreigners, vote for extreme rights, tightening of borders, are few visible signs of closure that are happening with the advent of the crisis. The debate on closure is relevant: how can we secure commons, avoid anonymity that occurs when people do not involve locally on the long run?

The debate could be presented as a divide between ‘communitarian’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ models. On one hand the communitarian model stresses the importance of a given community as opposed to others. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan model tends to be associated with the vision of an open individual that would not be constrained by communities.

We defend the idea that we do not need to be restricted to these two options. On one hand communities can be open, individuals can be part of different communities, and communities can refer themselves to negotiable identities and have blurred frontiers. These key issues are for now largely disregarded by ecologists. A few prominent ecologists have had some stands in favour of closing borders and closed identities. Some mention even local patriotism. The idea of bioregionalism could lead to the creation of new closure. Rees for example, prominent initiator of the ecological footprint, comes to the conclusion that the population of rich countries, that consume more, need to reduce their population, and reduce immigration in order to reduce their impacts. On the other hand cosmopolitanism does not need to escape from attachment to the local.

Degrowth gives a lot of importance to the idea of limits, and the idea of threshold (cf Illich). But we are not using these notions to restrict liberty, but on the contrary to restrict what would affect it. The idea of frontier (a relatively new idea in human history) on the contrary is often about securing a wealth for a few against others, about liberty sometimes but only for the ones on the right side. We would like to reduce distance between producers and consumers, not by setting a border, but rather by fighting large-scale and fast transport infrastructures, which at first sight seems contrary to common sense.

A few misconceptions

1 “The global (capitalist) growth has enabled to open borders”

Supposedly the advent of capitalism has come with a reduction of violence, with openness of borders. This is only a reality for the rich part of the world population which has the privilege of travelling where it wants unlike 80% of humanity as a consequence of laws favouring western travellers (visas) and wealthy individuals.

2 “The global (capitalist) growth has helped diversity”

This might have been true for some time, but the reverse process is occurring now. The globalised market led to the generalization of products from multinationals (coca cola, being the most well-known), as well as generalization of the western lifestyle. In general the idea of maximization of utility, the base of capitalism is reaching all corners of the world, reducing the space left for other types of relations, especially the gift & care relations which leave space for much wider diversity. Neo-liberalism and Keynesianism, two faces of the “growth coin” are two logics that create a strong dependence into the growth of production, consumption and exploitation. As resources are limited, both neo-liberalism and Keynesianism lead ultimately to closure.

3 “Criticizing growth is always reactionary”

Supposedly degrowth would be a call for going back to “identitarian” closed-communities against the liberal democracy and the “open-society” as defined by Popper. Although neo-liberals defend the idea of open-society through economic growth, economic growth in the real world, the one which has limits, leads to resources scarcity and ultimately exclusion, in contradiction with the supposed goal of Popper. Growth in a finite world leads to a lack

of resources and to economic difficulties for a large part of humanity. Reacting to those crises without challenging high consumption lifestyles (the western way of life that reached the global middle class) will lead to resource scarcity and intensify competition for good jobs positions. This will likely create a fear of those who might 'steal' resources (bread usually) and jobs, in all likelihood the immigrant or the 'other'. As a consequence, we expect, and experience already in this present crisis, the closing of doors and borders.

4 "Criticizing growth is always emancipatory"

Most of extreme right is fiercely pro-growth. However there are recently extreme right groups of the new right who adopted an anti-growth discourse, like the followers of Alain de Benoist. Their ideas lead directly to ethnic segregation and cultural separatism. Also several renowned personalities like Constanza, Rees and Daly have officially supported the Carrying Capacity Network, a USA lobby with a strong discourse against illegal immigrants (or against their legalization). Although Daly recently took out his name from the board, he is still an opponent of immigration in the US. Also the so-called growth-busters, with Dave Gartner, has been focalising on population reduction, closing of regional borders and immigration reduction. This leads to one question: where does the boundary between degrowth emancipatory responses and extreme right/reactionary idea stands ?

An alternative project: the cosmopolitan localism / cosmopolitan autonomy /open localism

Localism does not need to be closed. Within degrowth we talk about the importance of supporting, practicing and theorizing the so-called «open-localism», or "cosmopolitan localism". Open-localism has been mentioned several times since the development of degrowth as movement and political proposals. It means a type of localism which does not create frontiers, which cherishes diversity and multi-level thinking while promoting the creation of open and integrative local projects as well as slow travels. How is it that a country like Switzerland (we could mention other countries) closes its borders, while its wealth comes from questionable exploitation of international resources? Problems are multi-level and need adapt to its levels of relevance. One of the axes of open localism is the fight against large infrastructures of transport, understanding political backgrounds & promoting solidarity. We want to be in relation with our surrounding environment, to reduce the distance between consumer and producers (or be "consumers-producers"), be sensitive to what we can see and feel, while being cosmopolitan and recognize the multi-level character of many aspects of present life. This is line with our friend Diogenes (possibly the first degrowth philosopher, and inventor of cosmopolitanism). Our identity is about acting in coherence, and certainly not given by consumer products, or exclusion.

There are several reasons why degrowth is fundamentally a project of open localism challenging closed identities.

The change of lifestyles related to degrowth leads to giving up all sorts of strong identity attributes associated with consumption items such as cars or large houses. In this context changing consumption patterns for degrowth means changing the constituents of our identity. Will it fall in a new dogma? It does not need to, because degrowth can be applied a thousand different ways. Each degrowth lifestyle could be generalized, but is unique in practice. We fundamentally acknowledge that the need for identity, one of the needs defined by Max-Neef, can be satisfied in many diverse ways. Degrowth actually implies a rethinking of personal satisfiers and a collective & deep democratic debate on collective satisfiers as the best way to fulfil given societal needs. The identities brought by degrowth are negotiable and are not cemented on given satisfiers. Within the degrowth movement, a very wide combination of concerns and approaches have been identified that makes degrowth very far from an ideology or any norm in thinking (Demaria et al. 2013). Proofs of this are the vibrant and rich debate and conflicts existing within the degrowth movement (Duverger 2011). As opposed to many movements who have a strong identity based on an artificial marker against an 'enemy', the degrowth movement is composed of a wide diversity of actors.

We argue that the discourse of the degrowth process and project, if taken into consideration with all its philosophical origins, dimensions and strategies can actually be a remedy for identity closure and exclusion. We conclude that the key difference between the degrowth movement and the reactionary elements of society (that can sometimes be against growth) is at the level of identity closure. Degrowth requires going out of closure by developing communities of projects, and in many cases question and possibly challenge the idea of non- negotiable identitarian communities (with the exception of those that are frugal, oppressed or endangered like a small tribe in Amazonia).