



## Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

# A postgrowth society will have to be democratic or will not be at all

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The goal of growth at any cost has led to privatization, flexibilization of the labour market, indebtedness, and austerity politics. All this has been increasingly jeopardizing democratic welfare-states by increasingly exposing them to the control of multinational economic powers. Growth, which used to be an essential factor for the stabilization of modern Western Welfare States, has now turned into a threat for their very democratic core. Is degrowth the right answer to this?

Although a large majority of the degrowth advocates explicitly commit to democracy, it is dangerous to consider the relation between degrowth and democracy as an obvious one, which does not need further critical scrutiny.

A serious, deep-going and daringly self-critical discussion about democracy has to play a central role in the further development of the degrowth movement.

### 1. Degrowth threatens democracy? Being aware of the dangers!

**1.1** Modern democracies have arisen and stabilized themselves by means of economic growth. The improvement of the material and overall conditions of the majority of the people has rendered their participation in democratic processes possible. Economic independence is a necessary condition for participation. A good example is gender equality and emancipation struggles. The modern welfare state as we know it (which reduced to a certain extent inequality, improved public education, general health care, and social security for all members of society) relies on economic growth for both, its stabilization (low social conflicts, high tax revenues), and legitimization (unemployment, perspective of improvement for oneself & one's own children, independence from family bindings, individual freedom). How can the a guarantee for the access to basic services (education, transport, health, housing) in a degrowth/postgrowth society be envisioned and secured?

**1.2** Degrowth positions are attractive to conservative visions, according to which the end of growth spells the end of the welfare state and any kind of social security related to it. Conservative post-growth analysts, such as the German sociologist Meinhard Miegel, articulate following equation: degrowth = less tax revenues = shrinking of welfare state = reallocation of services to family & the private sector (care, education) = less materialistic-based path to happiness & more family relations, spiritual values, community values. In the absence of political measures for income redistribution & for public services, the

option of actually enjoying cultural & non material values, however, is open only to those, who do not have to work all day for making a living & take care of family members in their spare time. Such views are antidemocratic and serve the logic of the system (pacification through voluntary simplicity instead of struggles for the redistribution of wealth and the access to participation). Moreover, proposals in terms of re-localization & bioregionalism, which seem to do away with the institutional coordination function of central democratic institutions, often lack adequate models for an inclusive democracy (cultural heterogeneity, mobility, domination structures) and for anti-discrimination interventions for the protection of minorities, of disabled people, and of all those who are exposed to cultural or economic forms of exclusion.

## **2. Democracy needs degrowth – a path of salvation?**

Democracy is being hijacked by the dominating growth paradigm in modern, Western, capitalistic societies: what we call representative democracy is in reality the organized defense of the privileges of the fews. The overall, compulsive growth logic works as a kind of natural law above our heads and hinders real democratic decisions towards alternative paths of social development. According to several degrowth-advocates, liberating ourselves from the pervasive growth-diktat is necessary for a truly democratic path, in which the people decide about how they want to live together. According to them, representative democracy is coming to its end (or it is being finally unmasked in its being subdued to dominant, economic powers). Thus, degrowth might be a path to re-invent & strengthen real democracy by re-embedding the economy back into the social & the political sphere. We are currently facing the alternative between recession under the current system conditions of capitalism or a path of planned degrowth. However, the path of a planned degrowth is a challenge, because design might mean both, a centralized, technocratic, and eco-fascist path, and a democratic, bottom-up, largely participatory process of transformation.

## **3. Degrowth needs democracy: a postgrowth society will be democratic or will not be at all!**

**3.1** A post-growth-society can stabilize itself and guarantee a good life for all citizens only if all its members actively and factually participate in shaping its basic institutions. For a long time the promise of increasing welfare linked to economic growth has guaranteed the pacification of social conflicts and secured for a large amount of people a fairly good life in material terms. Hence, issues concerning the good life could be privatized and left to merely individual decisions about one's own personal life-style. Consumption has replaced political debates about the conditions for a good life by strengthening the illusory freedom of options: hence, everyone is free to choose one's own life (style) according to her own preferences and her resource availability. However, once the perspective of constant growth ceases to be an available option, the question of the good life is back on the political agenda and requires even more democratic participation than ever before.

**3.2** A society that is no longer dependent on growth for its stabilization has the unique chance of shaping its own basic institutions autonomously instead of depending on the dominant interests of big economic powers. It can retrieve control over the whole mode of production, consumption, and use of products and services, thus implementing a real economic democracy. Economic democracy demands that we leave the role as **consumers**, whose influence on modes of production is limited to their purchasing patterns, and claim the role as **citizens** who decide together what is needed and how it has to be produced in the society we live in. This does not mean returning to a centralized and bureaucratic organization of the economy by the State as it was the case in the Soviet countries. Rather,

real economic democracy expands the realm of collective autonomy and freedom, which are diminished by a centralized State control. By strengthening civil society and enhancing the possibility for all citizens to actively participate in economic processes such as cooperatives, solidarity-oriented enterprises, self-managed workshops, decentralized (yet solidary) forms of energy production and technology development, real economic democracy blurs the boundaries between production, consumption, and use. Regional diversification under the premise of network-like cooperation and solidarity enhances resilience and the possibility of democratic control over the modes of production. The project of a post-growth-society envisions a strong relocalization not only of economic production and services, but also of democratic decisions and administration. However, democracy needs in the long run structures of coordination and cooperation beyond the local scale. So far however, little has been said about how to guarantee a general societal coordination in a post-growth-society. We do not know yet whether it will be accomplished by a national state as we know it, or we will witness a new, different form of coordination yet to be invented. Anyway, a post-growth-society will probably not be able to persist in the long run only on the ground of a loose cooperation among independent localities. Moreover, the danger of radical and ideological localisms has to be counterbalanced by a democratically legitimated structure that intervenes against discrimination, exclusion, and isolation.

**3.3.** A vivid and true democracy is the basic condition for a good life for all: once growth ceases to be the all-encompassing guarantee for increasing welfare, the conditions for a good life require societal negotiation. Such a negotiation implies debating about common values, while constantly monitoring forms of discrimination and exclusion, and keeping spaces open for resistance, critique, and opposition.

A debate about needs is unavoidable to empower citizens against the alienating creation of new pseudo-needs with the goal of securing further growth. By taking seriously the hostility against collective discussions about needs due to their paternalistic aftertaste, we must distinguish between needs and satisfiers: collective negotiation is not so much about what kind of needs are adequate, authentic, right, or wrong. Rather, we should decide collectively only about the modes and forms of their satisfaction. If mobility is the need and having a car only one possible satisfier out of many, it is a matter of collective negotiation which kinds of satisfiers are supported by the community and which are not. Hence, it is a collective, political decision whether to invest in more highways and parking lots or in public transportation and alternative mobility forms. The debate about needs addresses political and institutional conditions for a good life for all society members and not individual life-style decisions. It concerns how people want to shape the conditions of their living together.

#### **4. Challenges for a democratic degrowth path**

The link between degrowth and democracy is not obvious, but has to be constructed, defended, and continuously questioned.

Questions for the GAP group:

- 1) Can a democratic degrowth society remain within the systemic structures of modern societies? If not, what has to/ would change (market, capitalism, form of government, institutions)?
- 2) Which form of democracy are we fighting for? Representative or direct? Are there any mixed models to bring back representative democracy under the direct control and

participation of the people? How do we deal with the risk of a facebook democracy in which the ,I like' button replaces deliberative processes in society?

- 3) How does the coordination of localities works? How do the different scales (local, regional, international) interconnect? How do we defend us from nationalisms, localisms, & racism? How can discrimination be kept at bay? How can social, formal, & juridical justice be guaranteed to all citizens independently from their being embedded in social and solidarity networks?
- 4) How do we reorganize work/labour in a degrowth/post-growth society? If we organize the provision of social services by strengthening non-paid work and the care sector, what does it imply for gender or class relations?
- 5) How do we deal with the open-endedness of democratic processes, which might very well lead to paths contrary to degrowth? What is the role of 'experts' if any?
- 6) How might a transition path look like? Who is in charge? Whose voices are heard, whose are excluded? How do we know and how do we decide and identify which direction is the one to go?
- 7) Which institutions in the wide sense of the terms are required & envisioned? Which social security systems do we need for a degrowth society? How could they be secured, financed, organized?