

Potentials of the debate on de-growth for socio-ecological transformation and climate change policy

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1. Degrowth through a transformation lens

Introduction: what is degrowth?

Unlike more or less established fields of academic research dealing with socio-ecological transitions or transformations, such as transition management or some streams of social and political ecology, degrowth is neither an established field, nor a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense, nor does it intend to be one. Yet, it carries the *potential* for a new paradigm for social and political theory (Muraca 2013). Degrowth is rather *"...an attempt to re-politicise the debate on the much needed socio-ecological transformation..."*, by becoming a *"...confluence point where streams of critical ideas and political action converge"* (Demaria et al. 2013: 192-193).

The first uses of the term go back to discussions amongst the French intellectuals in the 1970s (Amar 1973), including the translation of selected texts by Georgescu-Roegen (1979). However, the "modern" history of degrowth stems from social movements at the beginning of the century in France and Italy, and only re-entered the academic world recently, marked by the organisation of the 1st International Conference on Economic Degrowth in 2008 in Paris, followed by similar, larger conferences in Barcelona (2010), Montreal (2012) and Venice (2012). Degrowth has thus been described as an example of "activism-led science" (Martinez-Alier et al. 2011). Without overlooking the "activist" side of the movement, this article will mainly consider the major conceptual contributions of degrowth, as discussed in the latest renaissance of the term. Within this framework, two of the most concise and representative definitions of degrowth are provided below:

"Sustainable degrowth may be defined as an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term" (Schneider et al. 2010: 512).

"Sustainable degrowth can be defined from an ecological–economic perspective as a socially sustainable and equitable reduction (and eventually stabilisation) of society's throughput" (Kallis 2011: 874).

A closer look at these definitions reveals two interesting points. First, there is a striking absence of the economic parameter. Degrowth proponents emphasize the difference between degrowth and negative growth and do not associate themselves with a position asking for negative GDP growth. GDP degrowth is not a priority, but a likely result of degrowth. Being ignorant about it (like van den

Bergh 2011 proposes) is not considered enough as this stance ignores the close link between growth and the deterioration of a range of environmental and social parameters, as well as the lack of historical evidence of decoupling of natural resource use and environmental impacts from economic growth. On the other hand, striving for negative GDP is falling in the same trap one criticises. Therefore, *“the goal of sustainable degrowth is not to degrow GDP. GDP will inevitably decline as an outcome of sustainable degrowth, but the question is whether this can happen in a socially and environmentally sustainable way”* (Kallis 2011: 874). This takes us to the second interesting point, that is the emphasis on the use of the phrase *“sustainable degrowth”*, not in the sense of a degrowth that will be sustained indefinitely, but referring to the social and ecological sustainability of the process, as well as the end-state (Schneider et al 2010).

Ontological assumptions

The degrowth proposal starts off with the premise that a further growth of the economy is socially, ecologically and economically unsustainable (Alexander 2012). Therefore, *“...if degrowth is inevitable, the question is how it can become socially sustainable, i.e. a prosperous and stable, rather than a catastrophic, descent”* (Kallis 2011: 873). In this quest, degrowth draws from a wide array of sources:

- Deep ecology, environmentalism, strong sustainability
- Culturalist critique of development, anti-utilitarianism
- Meaning of life, buen vivir, spirituality, non-violence, voluntary simplicity
- Ecological economics, bioeconomics
- Direct, real or participatory democracy
- Justice, equity, redistribution

(modified from Flipo 2009, Schneider et al. 2010, Demaria et al. 2013, Muraca 2013).

In these lines, some of the key influences and main ideological standpoints of the emerging degrowth movement include the critiques of Ellul (1964) and Illich (1973) of the technological society and the consumer culture, as well as the Castoriadian notion of autonomy and the *“social imaginary”* (Castoriadis 1998[1975]). The movement is also deeply inspired by, and in a way revisiting, Georgescu-Roegen’s (1971) and the Meadows et al. (1972) Limits to Growth debate. More recently, there is an incorporation of issues of (eco)feminism, Marxism, and domination (Perkins 2010, Brand 2013).

Degrowth, from a biophysical point of view, is seen as a process towards a steady state economy (Kerschner 2010). However an explicit recognition of the diversity of its sources listed above is considered essential in order to avoid reductionist criticisms and misconceptions fundamentally incompatible with the ideas of the degrowth movement. A concern with biophysical limits or environmental degradation is therefore always considered together with justice and democracy, in order to avoid top-down anti-immigration and eco-authoritarian proposals. Similarly, an explicit focus on *“buen vivir”* opposes environmental friendly but techno-centred solutions (Demaria et al. 2013).

Proponents of degrowth take a clear stance against green reformist ideas, or concepts like sustainable development, that are considered contradictory in terms (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010). The

concept of transformation is therefore central and explicit within the degrowth debate, yet with varying degree of radicalness. As the closing phrase of the Declaration of the 2nd International Conference on Degrowth in Barcelona 2010 outlines, “...*the challenge now is how to transform, and the debate has just begun*” (Degrowth Declaration Barcelona 2010).

Objects of transformation

From a degrowth perspective, the object of transformation is the current (western) consumer-capitalist societies, including their institutional structure and associated value system, i.e. the current capitalist (growth) social imaginary (Latouche 2010) and the domination of “economism” (Kallis et al. 2009) in all spheres of social life. Growth is considered integral to this system: “It is not that this society *has* a growth economy; it is that this *is a growth* society” (Trainer 2012: 593). It is exactly this “growth society” that forms the object of a degrowth transformation.

Even though the envisioned transformation includes a radically new social imaginary and extensive institutional transformations, some have also suggested the need to make smaller steps and transform more tangible elements of society, like for example to support social enterprises, as a potential stepping stone (Johanisova et al. 2012).

Subjects of transformation and the role of agency

Multiple subjects of transformation can be identified within the degrowth literature. The role of individuals, civil society and the state is considered more important and there is generally less faith in market policies and reforms. The political subject of degrowth is not traceable along conventional lines of class (Kallis et al. 2012), but consists of a greater alliance between activists, academics, practitioners, ecologically concerned citizens, unemployed and underemployed, and includes those struggling for environmental justice in the Global South (Martinez-Alier 2012), and peripheral North (Zografos 2013).

Some authors in the degrowth debate express more optimism towards the idea of individual voluntary simplicity: “The changes can only come from the bottom, via slow development of the ideas, understandings, and values within ordinary people, leading them to begin building and taking control of their local economies” (Trainer 2012: 597). On a broader level, degrowth promotes the overall repoliticisation of individuals, in replacing the consumer by the citizen (Fournier 2008). The general idea is that Individuals, on their own or via forming collectives, can then create “nowtopias” (Carlsson and Manning 2010), alternative economic practices, shaping a new political subject (Kallis et al. 2012).

Other subjects include research institutions, civil society, social movements and even national governments, shaping the public discourse, creating spaces and experimenting with alternative institutional structures. This could happen at all scales, but towns, suburbs and neighbourhoods (Trainer 2012) are usually considered as more suitable starting points, as shown by the strong links with the eco-village and transition town movements.

Means of transformation

The means of transformation, also referred to as “degrowth strategies” vary from oppositional activism to building alternatives and reformism from local to global levels (Demaria et al. 2013).

- a) *Oppositional activism*: This involves direct action by civil society such as demonstrations, boycotts, civil disobedience etc. Such oppositional activism cannot bring transformational change by itself, but can slow down unsustainable paths and raise awareness.
- b) *Building solidarity economy alternatives (nowtopias), creating new institutions outside of present ones*: Examples include cohousing projects, producer-consumer cooperatives, permaculture initiatives, ecovillages, open source technologies, non-monetary exchange systems etc. These examples show alternatives in practice and have the potential of changing values. In the words of Trainer (2012: 597), “*we do not have to get rid of consumer-capitalist society before we can begin to build the new society. The way to transcend the consumer-capitalist system in the long run is to ignore it to death*”.
- c) *Reform current institutions to create conditions for societal transformation*: Some consider this as conflicting with the goal of degrowth as a project of social transformation. However we cannot escape the fact that degrowth *has to* emerge from the current, capitalist, system (Boonstra and Joose 2013), so even a transformation has to include steps of “revolutionary reformism” (Demaria et al. 2013:207). This follows Gorz’s (1967) idea of a *non-reformist reform*: “*...while a reformist reform subordinates its objective to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system, a non-reformist reform implies a modification of the relations of power and implies structural reforms*” (Muraca 2013: 166).

Examples include environmental policies (resource and CO2 caps, extraction limits), social policies (basic income, maximum income, social security guarantees, reduced working hours) and economic proposals (“green” investments, alternative currencies, social enterprises and cooperative firms, ethical banks, environmental taxation), as well as an array of more radical proposals, such as the restriction on advertisement and the creation of commerce free zones (Jackson 2009, Johanisova et al. 2012, Kallis et al. 2013, Korten 2008, Latouche 2009, Speth 2012).

Drivers of transformation

Degrowth is seen as a as a direct response to the triple environmental, social and economic crisis (Schneider et al. 2010). Even though the role of crisis in facilitating people into action is often acknowledged, if this happens too fast, there will be no time for human societies to reorganise and we could end up with situations of increasing inequality. Therefore degrowth proponents consider the crisis as an opportunity (Schneider et al. 2010), to reorganise our societies and manage a “prosperous way down” (Odum and Odum 2006), before the collapse becomes catastrophic. Nevertheless, degrowth as described in the previous sections is considered desirable in its own sake, and should be pursued even without the existence of a crisis and without having reached some environmental, social or economic limit.

Visions and pathways

Degrowth in its core offers exactly a *vision* for the radical transformation of society. More than just a critique to GDP growth, it provides a radical questioning of society, and a tentative vision for a post carbon, post growth society. In many respects, degrowth is an attempt to envision the next great transformation (Haberl et al. 2011). Taking the biophysical limits to growth as a starting point it proposes a voluntary way out, before collapse becomes catastrophic. Moreover, it is clear that one cannot degrow forever, but the result should be some sort of a steady state economy (Kerschner 2010). Whether this system will look more like some kind of socialism (Smith 2010), steady state capitalism (Lawn 2011), or something else, is currently under debate. Also influential within the degrowth community is degrowth's anti-systemic potential which in Gorz's and Castoriadis' terms *"...is not primarily in the sense of a replacement of a certain system by a different, possibly better one. Rather, it is the critique of the very idea of 'a system' as a functional given structure reproducing itself almost independently from the needs, aspirations and desires of people"* (Muraca 2013: 166).

A commonly cited vision within the degrowth community is Castoriadis' notion of a revolution, as the radical transformation of society, via the self-conscious creation and modification of society's institutional structure by the citizens. According to Castoriadis, an autonomous, or "post-revolutionary", democratic society should not be simply a self-managed society, but a society that self-institutes itself explicitly, not once and for all, but continuously (Castoriadis 1988). This then requires a democratic culture and a democratic identity (Olson 2006). "Revolution" is therefore not only about reacting, but most importantly about the building of alternative values that will lead to institutions less totalitarian, more democratic, more participatory. It is a continuous process of self-institution by the citizens themselves, which should lead to the radical transformation of society. If we envision a democratic convivial culture, we need to make space for such a culture to emerge by reclaiming the public sphere and public spaces, literally and metaphorically, so open up more opportunities to be defined in different terms (Fournier 2008) and initiate a process of self-institution.

2. Degrowth and climate change

A call for repoliticisation

There is not one view on climate change within the degrowth literature. Indeed, if one argues that the oil crisis of the 1970s signalised the end of the growth controversy, then the current "climate crisis" signals the re-awakening of the debate. A general consensus is that efficiency and technological innovation alone cannot prevent climate change, so a downscaling of economic activity and material affluence is required (e.g. van den Bergh and Kallis 2012). However this argument does not question the way in which the climate change discourse is framed and presented; other voices have been more critical. According to Swyngedouw (2010), climate change is portrayed as a global, universal concern (Humanity, THE Environment, THE People), requiring common action, a fact that masks social and ideological differences, as well as internal power structures. Climate change, as a "post-political populist" project *"...does not invite a transformation of the existing socio-ecological*

order but calls on the elites to undertake action such that nothing really has to change, so that life can basically go on as before” (Swyngedouw 2010:223). The argument here is that by accepting climate change as an unquestioned global concern, based on unquestioned expert scientific evidence, it is justified to invite technocrat specialists to manage it. “*Post-politics is marked by the predominance of a managerial logic in all aspects of life, the reduction of the political to administration where decision-making is increasingly considered to be a question of expert knowledge and not of political position*” (Swyngedouw 2010: 225). This implicitly supports the view that societal issues (including the political organisation) should be resolved using mainly non-political means.

In other words, the argument goes that the climate change discourse has prompted a certain, imposed “ecologisation” of society, when what we really need is more democratisation, and the emergence of new positive visions that would trigger the process of socioecological transformation. The degrowth proposal criticises reactionary “solutions” such as sustainable development and managerial approaches to overcome the climate crisis, where conflicts are either ignored or externalised to an imminent climate catastrophe. Instead, it intends to explicitly repoliticise the climate change discourse (among others), by opening spaces of deliberation, also giving voice to the marginalised (rather than speaking *in the name of* the poor), exploring the option space for sustainability and envisioning new socioecological futures. It aims at unmasking societal conflicts, making them explicit, exposing vested interests and power structures. In this respect, degrowth, rather than a purely ecological call, may be seen more as a project of political emancipation.

Debates about the “post-carbon society” entail a much broader focus than simply reducing CO₂ emissions and aim at exposing (and deconstructing) the dominant power structures of the *fossil fuel energy regime*, which would of course entail clear winners and losers. Envisioning “post-growth” or “de-growth” societies extends this argument further than the energy system. Degrowth, as an interpretative framework, structurally links the goal of reducing CO₂ emissions with demands such as food sovereignty, stressing the point that such individual concerns only make sense as part of a general struggle for the socio-ecological transformation.

Implications for climate change research agenda

Climate change is understood as a challenge that enters the territory of “post-normal science” (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993), requiring not only interdisciplinary research, but also more transdisciplinary cooperation. Quoting from module 3 of JPI Climate’s strategic research agenda (societal transformation): “*This JPI module [...] is related to two normative settings: (i) there is a need for societal transformations and (ii) societal transformations ought to be sustainable*” (JPI Climate SRA 2011: 61). “[T]he notion of an open transformation in contrast to a planned transition from state A to B needs to be explored” (JPI Climate SRA 2011: 56). Driessen et al. (2013) make a very useful distinction between “*scientific analyses of societal transformations under climate change*” and “*scientific analyses for societal transformations under climate change*”. In the first, analytical approach, social sciences stand as critical observers, whereas in the second, normative approach, social sciences act as co-designers of solution strategies. “*Social scientists need to make a purposeful decision as to whether and how they intend to act merely as analysts in the field of climate change*

and societal transformations and to what extent they also aspire to a role as a 'change agent'" (Driessen et al. 2013: 4).

As already discussed, degrowth has clear normative underpinnings, and as such implies research both *on* and *for* transformation. On an analytical level, there is a need to understand the social and systemic dimensions of climate change, identify the structural barriers as well as the “winners” and “losers” of a sustainability transformation, and compare different feasibility scenarios (e.g. Victor 2012). But degrowth, perhaps more importantly, is at the same time a call for proactive, emancipatory research *for* transformation, i.e. research on how to bring about the envisioned transformation. This implies that there is at least a generally accepted normative vision of a “degrowth society”, but also places our attention to the potential transformation “pathways”. Focusing solely on a certain ecological goal, such as reducing CO₂ emissions, risks being associated with eco-fascist views (e.g. Neumayer 2006). Likewise, focusing too much on the process, like some streams of transition research do, may face the problem of a moving environmental target.

Therefore, degrowth on the one hand explicitly supports the vision of a democratic, egalitarian and ecologically sustainable society and, on normative level, intends to redefine the notions of freedom, emancipation and autonomy, currently advertised as achievable only individualistically (e.g. Blühdorn 2011). On the other hand, it calls for a redemocratisation of the processes of decision making and defining societal priorities, prompting us to experiment with instruments for participatory “opening up” (option creating) and “closing down” (decision making) procedures (Stirling 2008).

Conclusion

The “limits to growth” debate has been going on (and off) since many decades. Original concerns, also leading to the idea of a steady state economy, focused on the biophysical limits to growth. The biggest contribution of the degrowth debate so far is not the recognition that there are biophysical limits. It is rather the increasing and explicit emphasis on the social consequences that this realisation entails and, at the same time, a call for how to make the “inevitable” biophysical degrowth socially sustainable, between and within countries. Thus here lies the invaluable potential of the debate: degrowth, in its broadest sense, can exactly offer a new political project to trigger this process of societal transformation:

“...[I]n these times of crisis we need a new story-line and vision; a new political project, not individual environmental policies, increasingly rejected because of their “cost on the economy”. Sustainable degrowth does away with economism and growth and offers such a promising vision which is cohesive enough for the purpose” (Kallis 2011: 879).

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