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Growth, Degrowth, and the right to a 'good life': A scrutiny of the ethical assumptions in the growth-degrowth debate with respect to distributive **justice**

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is a critical scrutiny of the ethical assumptions laid down by advocates of growth and degrowth with respect to distributive justice and the normative conditions for a 'good human life'. More specifically, an argument is made in favor of Sen's and Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' as the most suitable theoretical framework for addressing questions of justice within the growth-degrowth debate.

Keywords

degrowth; growth; justice; capabilities approach; distribution; ethics of the good life

1 Introduction

In the last year, as a result of the recent financial crisis, the degrowth-discourse has been receiving increasing attention even in countries where it had been so far ignored. The pressing question is whether growth as we know it (i.e. as exponential economic growth mainly but not exclusively according to GDP) is still an achievable goal for affluent countries. Given the key-role that economic growth has been playing for decades as an attraction pole, around which issues of social justice, political stability, and welfare protection seemed to gravitate, the rising awareness that this system might no longer work as expected begets confusion in the old schemes of thought and opens a promising field for a new imaginary that might lead to alternative models.

From a philosophical point of view, as I have shown elsewhere (Muraca 2009; Muraca 2010), in the growth-degrowth-debate we are confronted with three basic questions; I will focus here only on the second and the third one:

- a) Is growth as we know it possible at all?
- b) Is growth as we know it morally justifiable or is it even morally necessary? This question addresses the issue of justice.
- c) Does growth as a path of development make sense at all? In other words, is it something that people might reasonably opt for? This question addresses the ethical issue about the idea of 'a good human life' that people have and whether in the light of practical reasoning (phronesis) the growth path is a desirable and wise option or not, even if it turned out that it presents no problems from a moral point of view.

2 Frame of the discourse

Both, advocates of growth and of degrowth claim that their option is crucial for the sake of justice. This claim needs further investigation. In the following sections I will first briefly present some reasons for this claim. I will then analyze some of the current approaches on distributive justice (welfarism, resourcism, and the capabilities-approach). Finally I will argue for the capabilities approach and show why I think that this is the most adequate framework for addressing questions of justice regarding growth/degrowth.

3 Claims for justice in the growth/degrowth debate

3.1 Growth as a condition for justice

Several scholars point out the link between growth and prosperity on the one hand and growth and political, social, and financial stability on the other (see among other Coyle 2001). Tim Jackson summarizes in his critique the reasons why growth is held to bring about fundamental benefits to society as follows: a) opulence is a necessary condition for flourishing; b) economic growth is closely correlated with certain basic entitlements; c) growth is functional in maintaining economic and social stability (Jackson 2009, 38). Similarly, Holzinger offers a detailed overview of the benefits that growth is supposed to deliver in his recent book (Holzinger 2010). I recall here some of these expected benefits

and move on to a critical scrutiny in the last section:

Since by economic growth the total amount of goods at disposal to be distributed increases and thus needs and preferences can be satisfied, it generally enhances the standard of living and also the quality of life of individuals (individual level). Under the assumption that individuals tend to the maximization of utility, growth is thus held to be a necessary condition for a 'good human life'. Moreover, welfare is held to be a necessary condition for individual freedom in shaping one's own life independently from the constraints of the community of origin.

Economic Growth supports Welfare States and opens more feasible options for distribution; in fact, due to an increase in the total amount of the cake, distribution policies are less unpopular since they do not imply a significant reduction of wealth for the better off (institutional level). This is held to be a crucial condition for democracies, which rely on the largest possible consensus. Moreover, economic growth leads to a greater amount of money available to the government for public services, thus helping social welfare systems. Accordingly, growth minimizes social conflicts and supports democratic stability.

Economic growth increases the well-being of all because, as the well-known dictum goes, 'a rising tide lifts all boats'. Advocates of growth refer to the virtuous circle of the Kuznet-Curve, according to which while a country is developing economic inequality increases over time up to a certain threshold; over that threshold the country still grows but inequality starts decreasing.

Economic growth is a necessary condition for employment. Increase of labor productivity and of labor force supply lead to rising unemployment unless the whole economy is growing faster than the per capita productivity of labor. We are faced with a positive feed-back-loop: increasing labor productivity due to technological development and education is an essential drive for economic growth, because it generates free capital for more technological investment and investment in human capital, which again increase labor productivity. Therefore, if large-scale-unemployment is to be avoided the economy must grow faster than labor productivity. This strong argument in favor of the correlation between economic growth and quality of life is commonly shared by liberals and socialists (see Leibiger 2003).

Economic growth is necessary for environmental protection. Advocates of growth claim that by applying the Kuznet-Curve to environmental issues a similar correlation can be drawn: Accordingly, the environmental impact on resources and sinks increases parallel to GDP up to a certain threshold, above which the economy continues growing while the environmental impact decreases. Moreover, economic growth by driving technological investment enables a significant improvement in terms of resource productivity. Accordingly, economic growth plays a major role in terms of intergenerational justice (leaving to future generations not only more man-made capital but also better technologies to cope with environmental problems) and of intragenerational justice (solving environmental problems on a global scale by technological development).

In 2005 Friedman in his book 'The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth' has correlated directly economic growth and moral development. He writes: 'economic growth – meaning a rising standard of living for the clear majority of citizens – more often than not fosters greater opportunity, tolerance of diversity, social mobility, commitment to fairness, and dedication to democracy' (Friedman 2005, 4). Friedman is well aware that economic growth as such does not always and necessarily lead to a more just society. However, he aims at showing the 'moral consequences' of economic growth both from a

conceptual and a historical point of view in terms of justice, social stability and democracy. He claims that one can directly correlate periods of economic growth and of stagnation respectively with a strengthening or a weakening of democratic values. This is not only due to material improvement, but also because economic growth influences positively our basic moral attitudes. As he maintains, 'if a rising standard of living makes a society more open and tolerant and democratic, and perhaps also more prudent in behalf of generations to come, then it is simply not true that moral considerations argue wholly against economic growth. Growth is valuable not only for our material improvement but also for how it affects our social attitudes and our political institutions' (ibidem 14).

According to Friedman crucial for this influence upon our moral attitudes is mainly the perspective of continuing prosperity and not only the achievement of a high living standard in absolute terms, as far as this perspective is within reach of a larger number of people. This is possible by means of a high social mobility as it is the case with the so-called 'American dream' (Friedman 2005, 16), in which economic advance is open to all and rising economically implies rising socially (he speaks of 'classlessness'). Accordingly, the opportunity to advance creates a sense of obligation to strive toward that end (ibidem, 15). The correlation between growth and open democracy seems thus to be reciprocal.

When Friedman speaks in terms of 'rising standards of living' the constant rising plays an essential role and not only reaching a good standard. By referring to studies on happiness Friedman holds that people evaluate their wellbeing against two benchmarks: their own past experience and the wellbeing of the people around them. While the second aspect gains increasing relevance in periods of economic downturn, the first aspect plays a major role during periods of growth. Therefore, even if growth does not per se lead to more equal distribution among different persons living in the same society it still enhances wellbeing for the same person diachronically and hence contributes to an increase in her quality of life. Friedman remarks furthermore that the perspective of an increase in personal wellbeing in the future would make people more willing to accept political constraints on their choices due to - for example - 'anti-discrimination laws, or special education programs for children from low-income families, designed to make actual mobility greater' (Friedman 2005, 87). In conclusion, since it seems easier to distribute the gains from a growing cake than the losses from a shrinking one, economic growth is a necessary condition even for distribution policies (and therefore for satisfying the second benchmark as well).

3.2 Growth as a threat for justice

As some Décroissance-thinkers hold, the diktat of economic growth is at the root of global injustice, both in terms of intergenerational and of intragenerational justice for several reasons, which I will only briefly mention here, because I assume that they are well-known within the degrowth-discourse.

The destruction of our natural environment (resources, sinks, biodiversity, climate) at a rate that widely exceeds the regeneration capacity of the ecosystems is a consequence of the assumption of economic growth as the unique goal of the economic activity (growth fetishisms). As I have shown elsewhere by reference to Georgescu-Roegen the core of the problem is not exceeding absolute limits in terms of entropy; rather, it is the exponential intensification in the employment of terrestrial resources and maintenance flows (Muraca 2009; 2010). Analysis of how growth is intended by mainstream economics (Georgescu-Rogen 1971; Daly 1996) and the well-known critique against measurement

instruments like GDP (Daly/Cobb 1994; Max-Neef 1995; Human Development Report, just to name some) show that growth can be considered as a threat to social justice.

Consequences are evident: climate change affects the fundamental conditions of living in terms of surviving and of quality of life of an increasing number of people on Earth especially in poor countries now and in the future; the increasing need for new resources and sinks leads to geopolitical forms of domination and economic dependency (in the most recent years the production of biomass for the North is a good example); the incomparable loss of biodiversity we are facing raises important ethical questions.

While some scholars argue for degrowth in northern countries (as a step towards a steady-state) and limited growth for poor countries, in order for them to achieve a higher standard of living (Martinez-Alier 2009), other scholars reject growth as a feasible and desirable path even for poor countries altogether. They claim that economic growth as we know it arose under the very condition of exploitation of other human lives (slaves, women, peasants ...) and of nature (so-called no-man's-land in colonies, exponentially increasing rates of usage of resources ...) and therefore it is unthinkable without these forms of exploitation and domination for present and future generations (Latouche 2007, Rahnema 2005, Davis 2004). Especially post-development scholars provocatively claim for a right of the South to poverty (a concept that they distinguish from destitution; Rahnema 2005) and therefore, to 'degrowth'. In fact, the increasing destitution of the countries of the global South is considered as a consequence of the growth logic: these countries are rendered completely dependent on the North in their economic choices as well as in their cultural orientation. So-called semi-voluntary poverty in 'vernacular societies' relies according to these scholars on social cohesion, local knowledge, traditional economic structures; therefore, it opens a space for self-determination along paths that are not fixed by the cultural western domination (Latouche 2007, Illich 1980, Rahnema 2005). Some advocates of growth plead for radical forms of self-sufficiency in terms of farming for one's own needs, of the production of as many commodities as possible outside of the market and of generation of energy (Pallante 2009). Others like Bonaiuti still hold on to the market but now reconsidered as a place where a strong civil society can express itself: a regulated market with a strong connection to the territory and democratic forms of production (cooperatives) and consumption (networks between consumers and producers) (Bonaiuti 2003).

Some degrowth-thinkers claim for a different concept of quality of life, which is disentangled from the idea of wellbeing in terms of wealth. Décroissance means accordingly neither mere reduction of economic growth nor stagnation with its consequences in terms of economic depression – both paths merely reverse the logic of growth and operate within the same paradigm, which assumes economic growth to be the necessary condition for welfare and therefore for quality of life. Rather, Décroissance implies a qualitative shift in the way we understand and implement 'quality of life'. It does not necessarily require renunciative individual life styles in the form of 'voluntary simplicity'. Rather, it envisions alternative economic and social paths towards a 'convivial' social togetherness, in which 'enjoyment of life' in a context of solidary reciprocity represents the core of economic development.

4 Distributive justice: current approaches

By addressing the question of justice related to the issue of growth/degrowth we have to consider three ethical issues: first, we have to ask towards whom we have duties of

justice, i.e. who possesses distributive entitlements. Second, we have to ask about the 'currency of justice' (such as resources, welfare, or capabilities) that is adopted in order to identify which entitlements we are talking about. Third, we have to decide according to which 'pattern of justice' (such as equality, priority, or sufficiency) entitlements should be distributed. In this section I will address only the second question. In the current discourse about the currency of justice one can identify three positions: welfarism, resourcism and the capabilities-approach.

4.1 Welfarism

According to Welfarism, which relies on utilitarian ethics, welfare intended as the function of a person's desires (or preferences) being satisfied is the only value that ultimately counts for its own sake. Welfare refers thus to utility as it is subjectively perceived by individuals and is typically identified with individual happiness (Sen 2009, 277). Distributive justice rather than concerning a certain set of goods (material or immaterial) to which individuals are entitled, considers the pleasure or happiness that these commodities yield to the subjects who use them. Accordingly, income and wealth in general count only insofar as they yield pleasure and utility. Utility functions of different individuals can be aggregated to a total unit (national happiness index). This seems at a first glance to be a feasible alternative to GDP because it is still 'measurable' and homogenizable.

More recent studies on happiness overlap with welfarism insofar as they hold that well-being should be defined in terms of subjective happiness and not of income. According to the satisfaction paradox happiness level increases parallel to income up to a certain threshold (calculated around \$15.000 per capita) over which they start diverging significantly (see Jackson 2009, 32ff.)

The happiness index relies on self-reported accounts of happiness and is strictly linked to subjective perceptions of well-being. In the degrowth-debate happiness research plays a major role because it enables a decoupling of subjective happiness from income and wealth and delivers arguments against the diktat of economic growth in terms of GDP as a necessary condition for happiness. However, by following the happiness path one has to buy into ethical and anthropological assumptions, which might be problematic.

Layard states that happiness is the ultimate goal of human action because it is a selfevident good while income or commodities are means to this goal. Accordingly, he pleads for a shift from standard of living to quality of life measured in terms of happiness (see Holzinger 2010). Moreover, Layard assumes that humans tend to a maximization of happiness, which should also be the goal of a nation's economy. However, happiness and quality of life are not synonymous. In fact, the focus on happiness neglects some important aspects: happiness is widely influenced by attitudes, mental dispositions, education and what Sen and Nussbaum call the adaptive phenomenon due to which especially poor or disadvantaged people tend to adjust to their unfavorable circumstances and to make life bearable in order to cope with daily adversities (Sen 2009; Nussbaum 2000). If we limit ourselves to assess self-reported happiness we miss essential aspects of justice. As Sen has shown with respect to self-reported health in the Indian regions of Bihar and Kerala, the objectively healthy state was subjectively healthpoor and vice versa, because in Bihar people had less ability to assess their own health situation and had less hope to do anything about it (Deneulin/Shahani 2010). Moreover, if happiness is taken as the final goal of action and no further reasons or motives are relevant, anything that leads to that goal is a mere means and therefore interchangeable and substitutable (weak sustainability). Since what counts is a self-reported state of

happiness, what leads to it can be arbitrary: there is no way of expressing a judgment about what makes people happy and why, even if it's something morally objectionable. According to (new) welfare economics individual utility functions are not interdependent. From an ethical point of view nobody is thus required to give reasons to others for her preferences.

Sen questions the assumption that happiness is the final goal and only intrinsic value of human action. In fact, people can decide to act according to other motives (altruism, care, and the like) against their personal happiness or advantage. When somebody acts against her personal happiness or utility this could be due to a number of constraints, both internal (psychological, biological) and external (social, institutional, physical) and therefore to a lack of substantial freedom. But this action could also be an expression of substantial freedom, an act of freedom rooted in a reasoned choice and the capabilities to implement it. When focusing on happiness as a measure for well-being we lack sufficient information and instruments to make this fundamental distinction.

With respect to future generation the welfarist approach is even more inadequate. As Page clearly points out, future generations might also adapt their desires in the face of environmental decay. 'They might learn to desire the possibilities offered by a warmer and wetter climate. They may, that is, adapt their desires so that they become 'contented victims' of climate change' (Page 2007, 455).

4.2 Resourcism

According to resourcism distributive justice consists in the fair distribution of impersonal resources, such as income and wealth, which are considered the capital sources for well-being and a good life. Usually the theoretical background of resourcism is John Rawls' theory of justice. According to Rawls 'social primary goods' should be distributed prima facie equally among the population unless an unequal distribution proves to benefit those who are worst-off.

There is a significant difference between Rawls' concept of justice and the reduction of wellbeing to income only: social primary goods encompass not only income and wealth but also freedom of movement, freedom of thought and the social bases of self-respect (Rawls 1975). Moreover, they are under the direct control of mechanisms of social justice, such as social taxation, education and employment, which have to secure that all citizens have fair and equal chances to access to offices and positions.

Rawls' main argument against a focus on happiness or on quality of life is that concepts of the good (and therefore of a good life) are plural and it is almost impossible to find a common ground for the definition of what is a good human life. Hence, the main issue of distributive justice is to find a fair distribution of goods and chances that enhances freedom and to leave to individuals the identification of what they call a good life (priority of the right over the good). Any attempt at a definition of the good runs the risk of paternalism and the consequent shrinking of personal liberty. According to resourcism no naïve trust in economic growth as a means to improve people's well-being is justified, although wellbeing can be best measured by considering commodities as well as chances. Resourcism calls for just institutions, which have the task of distributing wealth and chances among population. Rawls' difference principle (unequal distribution is morally justifiable only if it is for the advantage of the worst off), however, considers the possibility that inequality might work to a certain extent as a driving factor for economic growth and therefore bring about a benefit for the worst off in society. One problem with this assumption is that there are many degrees of being 'badly-off': what if the second

and third worst-off are not advantaged by the chosen distribution? How do we identify the threshold of being worst off? What if the advantage for the worst-off is still at a level far below a minimum standard of living/ of a good life?

Against Rawls Sen maintains that resourcism, even though goods are intended in a broad and inclusive way, still is concerned with good things rather than with what these good things do to human beings (Sen 1999). Moreover, it underplays the heterogeneity of human wellbeing and overlooks at least five essential factors to wellbeing: personal heterogeneity (age, pregnancy, bodily structure, disabilities.); environmental diversities (climate; geography); institutional variations (conditions for accessing education, ...); differences in relational perspectives (local customs and cultural patterns concerning for example appearing in public, ...); distribution within the family (Deneulin/Shahani 2010). In Nussbaum's terms resourcism falls short because it fails to take account of the fact that 'individuals need differing levels of resources if they are to come up to the same level of capability to function. They also have differing abilities to convert resources into actual functioning' (Nussbaum 2003, 35).

4.3 Capabilities-Approach

According to the capabilities-approach the currency for distributive justice are 'capabilities to function' and the focus lies on people's substantial freedom to achieve the life that they have reason to value. Functionings are defined by Sen as 'the various things a person may value doing or being', such as being healthy and well-nourished, being safe, being educated, having a good job, being able to have intercourse with loved ones and the like (Sen 1999, 75). Accordingly, functionings are related to income and goods but only insofar as they factually serve the achievement of functionings: i.e. what counts is what people are actually able to do with them. Capabilities refer instead to the substantial freedom to enjoy the various combinations of functionings that the person can achieve.

The core of the capabilities-approach is Sen's phrase 'value and have reason to value', because this marks a significant difference from the welfarist and from the resourcist approach. Primary goods are valuable only if people value them and not as such - in a sense Sen is saying that even Rawls' theory of fairness cannot do without assumptions of what is good and what is valuable. However, subjective valuation in terms of preferences is not an alternative either: while according to the utilitarian background of welfare economics individual preferences are taken as they are - no reason, i.e. no justification, has to be given to others -, Sen claims the necessity of giving an account for what we value. Moreover, in the utilitarian approach value is a function of utility and happiness, which are the ultimate goal; accordingly, valuation is an activity of instrumental rationality (calculus of the most efficient means) and is oriented towards maximization of what one wants (Sen 2009, 175 ff.). On the contrary, for Sen, people value functionings intrinsically; moreover, the reasons to value cannot be reduced to a homogeneous unit like utility but are multifaceted and plural. There is a categorical difference between what it is rational to choose in terms of welfare economics (i.e. what maximizes one's own utility) and what one has reason to choose, which implies a thorough critical scrutiny of one's own motives and implications in the face of others (Sen 2009, 181): 'rationality is primarily a matter of basing - explicitly or by implication - our choices on reasoning that we can reflectively sustain, and it demands that our choices, as well as our actions and objectives, values and priorities, can survive our own seriously undertaken critical scrutiny' (Sen 2009, 194). Scrutiny does not take place from an abstract or a transcendental point of view, disembodied from particular perspectives. Rather, by

referring to Smith's concept of the impartial spectator as somebody who is not directly involved in a state of affairs but is not detached either (she feels sympathetic with those who are directly involved and can make a judgment on the situation), Sen develops a concept of embodied impartiality as the guide for critical scrutiny of valuations and actions. Accordingly, there can be a plurality of impartial reasons, which might be all defensible in a deliberative setting.

The concept of the good and of a good life is neither something given (or even implemented by a board of experts, by the administrators or by activists and NGOs) nor does it correspond to mere individual preferences. Rather, it is the object of democratic processes of deliberation and critical scrutiny, which not only involve 'stakeholders', but also spectators from other positional perspectives. The capabilities approach raises also the issue of what process, group, philosophical structure or institution has the legitimate authority to decide what people have reason to value (Deneulin/Shahani 2010) and directs the attention to the substantial conditions for participation, including domination structures, actual access conditions, effective 'power' of being heard and making a difference. By substantial freedoms Sen intends the positive power of doing or enjoying something worth of doing or enjoying. It is not about compelling people to certain functionings, but laying down the substantial conditions for people to achieve them.

Similarly, Nussbaum claims that institutions are not only responsible for a fair distribution of resources, but also for the totality of capabilities and functionings that people can achieve. The role of institutions is to provide the substantial conditions for functionings and not to foster the actual achievement of certain functionings. This way, she claims, paternalistic conceptions of State intervention are excluded. Moreover, 'capability justice must be developed in a way that is tolerant and respectful of the choices people make and the diverging conceptions of the good life they possess' (Nussbaum 2006, 53ff.) without imposing a specific conception of the good life upon them. However, Nussbaum departs from Sen in proposing a list of basic capabilities on the ground of what one can reasonably consider the basic elements of a good human life. Her understanding of a good human life is not hedonic - it is not connected to assumptions of pleasure. Rather, it assumes that a human life cannot be considered full and dignified if it lacks certain basic capabilities to function: a person deficient in any of the capabilities fails to lead a fully human and dignified life. Deficiencies in any capability cannot be offset by enhancing the provision of one or more of the others (Page 2007, 463; for the list of capabilities see Nussbaum 2000).

By referring to Aristotle's ethics Nussbaum defends the concept of the 'good' and hence of a good human life as the ultimate goal of human action. The idea of a good human life relates to the whole life as a 'blessed' life (the actual meaning of 'eudaimonia') and relies on the anthropological assumption of humans as fundamentally social beings. The idea of the good cannot be clearly defined once and for all since its object is context-sensitive and essentially plural. This does not mean, however, that its meaning is arbitrary and left to a mere individual and subjective substantiation. With reference to Putnam's internal realism Nussbaum claims that it is possible to identify a common ground in terms of an overlapping consensus about the concept of a good life throughout different cultural settings by taking into account one's own experience as well as literature, myths, history, law and the voices of others.

Nussbaum's concept of the good life does not overlap with self-reported happiness since it claims a certain level of 'objectivity': regardless of what people actually feel about their condition, lacking one or more of the basic capabilities is an issue of justice. Nussbaum's perspective does not replace Sen's claim for public debate and critical scrutiny. Rather, it

offers a platform for discussion, in which a 'vague and thick conception of the good life' is proposed to a wide range of context-sensitive concretizations. As Page points out, however, 'there is a sense in which the approach is perfectionist for it will prohibit consumption patterns and lifestyles which harm the central functioning capabilities of others; and intervene to guarantee a certain minimum level of functioning where persons engage in practices that involve them losing their dignity or self-respect, being oppressed or in other ways ceasing to function as a free and equal citizen' (Page 2007, 466). Page adds to Nussbaum's list one further capability, which is crucial in the face of climate change and of future generations: 'ecological functioning capability', which he defines as the capability to experience life in an environment devoid of dangerous environmental impacts such as those associated with climate change.

The capabilities-approach is – I believe – more than any other compatible with the essential anthropological and ethical assumptions of degrowth and can thus offer a helpful normative underpinning for further development in theory and practice. Some criticism against Sen's concept of development has been formulated especially by advocates of post-development: in fact, Sen and Nussbaum do not address adequately issues of sustainability and growth. However, further works on the capabilities-approach by other scholars consider these aspects (Ott/Döring 2008; Page 2007a; Deneulin/Shahani).

So far the capabilities-approach has found a resonance especially in Jackson's work. While adopting it as a good starting point for redefining prosperity, Jackson points out that Nussbaum's list should not be read in terms of disembodied freedoms, but of 'bounded capabilities', which can be achieved only within two limitations: limits imposed by natural resources and sinks and limits imposed by the scale of global population (Jackson 2009). However, in his analysis Jackson does not take into account the concept of freedom assumed by Sen: it is not a matter of an unbounded realization of desires to improve one's own good life. Rather, it is about the substantial power of shaping one's own life according to what one has reason to value, including environmental conditions and the consequences on other people. Moreover, substantial freedom implies for Sen also taking full responsibility of one's own actions in proportion to one's own factual power. As he writes: 'A person not only has good reason to note the consequences that would follow from a particular choice, but also to take an adequately broad view of the realizations that would result, including the nature of the agencies involved, the process used and the relationships of people' (Sen 2009, 219).

5 The growth-degrowth debate and the right to a 'good human life'

Let me now go back to some of the claims that growth is a condition or a threat for justice. I will limit myself to a few considerations from the point of view of the capabilities approach.

The claim that growth increases the amount of goods at disposal and therefore improves quality of life relies on the assumption of non-satiation, according to which humans tend to maximize their utility and never reach a level of complete satiation of needs and preferences. Moreover, it assumes that quality of life is a function of the satisfaction of preferences by means of material or immaterial (but monetarizable) goods. According to the capabilities-approach having more goods at disposal does not say much about how people actually live and what they are able to do with them.

Several studies in the last decades have shown that the dictum that a rising tide rises all boats does not withstand thorough scrutiny. First, the so-called 'trickle-down effect' by which automatically the worst off in a society would benefit from an overall increment in wealth does not seem to hold anymore even in terms of mere income. As several scholars have shown, the immanent logic of exponential growth seems to lead to increasing inequalities and thus to an increasing gap between rich and poor in the absence of institutional measures of redistribution of wealth; in fact, economic growth in the last 25 years had significantly improved low-end-incomes in those countries with a more generous redistributive policy (see among others Kenworthy forthcoming). This is to say that economic growth had an impact on poverty reduction mainly by means of political redistribution. At least in affluent countries poverty is heavily influenced by redistribution but much less, if at all, by economic growth. Even in poor countries, in which growth might be held to be a more important factor for wellbeing and to a certain extent to the improvement of quality of life, its impact depends much on how the fruits of economic growth are used (Sen 1999, 44); whether growth leads to an improvement in the life chances and capability of the poor is pretty much a question of governmental policies rather than of economic growth on its own. Moreover, the virtuous circle of the Kuznet-Curve is not confirmed by empirical evidence either in affluent or in so-called developing countries.

Second, dynamic inequality (linked with some social mobility), which to a certain extent stimulates economic growth since it acts as an incentive to work more, to gain more, in order to climb the social ladder, does not seem to have the positive effects that Friedman points out. Rather, as studies on happiness have shown, social inequality is a main reason for subjective unhappiness because of the constant positional competition and the resulting treadmills (Binswanger 2006). The spiral of competition becomes thus an end in itself and leads to a significant reduction of the various and diverse human abilities to the mere competition-ability; in other words those who 'win' are not necessarily better at what they win, but rather at winning itself (Rosa 2006, 101).

Social inequality and competition have an influence also on the capabilities to achieve basic functionings since frustration, lack of social recognition, and shame can significantly reduce substantial freedoms. Moreover, dynamic inequality through growth leads to a structural change in the access to the basic substantial conditions for achieving important functionings: the standard for a 'good life', i.e. for a life worth of a human being, gets higher and higher not only in the subjective perception of people about relative happiness, but also objectively. Mobility is a good example: if everyone has an SUV driving a small car on the highway is not only a matter of social status, but is also extremely dangerous; having a computer up to date or a cell phone is often a necessity in order to live a decent life in terms of work but also in terms of communication with friends, doctors, offices and the like. Uta von Winterfeld claims a right to a sufficient life style, the right to have less, to be slower, without having to suffer a significant lack of substantial freedoms (von Winterfeld 2007). A similar argument can be made for poor countries, in which traditionally the access to many substantial conditions for a 'good life' used not to be mediated through money and therefore did not require a certain level of income. Some structural changes brought about in order to 'eradicate poverty' in poor countries might on the one hand increase the income per capita, but on the other they sometimes destroy the original competences and opportunities for accessing substantial conditions for a good life. The loss of local knowledge, the erosion of social networks, the imposition of western patterns of negotiation and measurement work in this way.

Moreover, as Degrowth-thinkers claim, the steady competition linked to social mobility and functional to growth destroys social connections and undermines the possibility of

other forms of relations not mediated by market values. In terms of the capabilities approach this can lead to a lessening of substantial freedoms and a significant loss in quality of life. However, relational and social networks should not be overestimated in general, since they can implement and hide relations of oppression and domination. The role of economic independency in terms of income can be crucial in this case, as several projects of empowering women in traditional societies by means of education and small credit support show. The correlation between wellbeing and quality of life seems to hold at least up to a certain threshold. Degrowth-thinkers and activists have to be very careful about idealizing traditional and pre-industrial societies as such. No culture is a compact scheme of ideas and behavioral patterns and no culture is isolated from others: without having to necessarily import western modes of thought one can find in the folds of cultural complexities emancipatory paths, metaphors for gender equity, and concepts of substantial freedom for individuals (see Sen 2009 about genuinely Indian ancient traditions that embody motifs of western 'Enlightenment' while being historically independent from it). Moreover, by including the perspective of the impartial spectator, be it a real, virtual or 'ideal' point of view which is taken into account, it is possible to avoid the encapsulation of 'cultural' discourses which might lead to radical and ideological localisms.

Third, even if we admit that it's easier to distribute gains from a growing cake, Peter Dietsch legitimately asks (contra Friedman) 'what guarantee do we have that this distribution will be just?' (Dietsch 2009, 109). Isn't the opposite assumption as plausible as this one, i.e. that precisely because of generalized economic growth people tend to be more willing to accept regressive tax and unequal distribution? Accordingly, one could advance the hypothesis that people are more willing to accept constraints because they are enforced by institutions perceived as just, whereas in times of generalized growth 'the discontent about the absence of just institutions can be obscured because everyone might be 'getting ahead' in absolute terms' (ibidem, 112). Moreover, the correlation between economic growth and 'good moral dispositions' does not seem to be univocally confirmed by the historical-empirical studies to which Friedman refers in his book, because relevant 'exceptions' are not taken into adequate account (ibidem, 108 & 110). It is plausible that at least over a certain threshold it is not growth that enhances moral dispositions but the perception of some kind of just distribution in terms of reducing inequalities. One could advance the hypothesis that once the positive relations of trust and reciprocity among people are broken or reduced to material exchange (money) one way of recovering some kind of trust can be by increasing the standard of living and reducing the conflict.

The capabilities-approach offers a good ground for addressing adequately the question of work and unemployment. The access to gainful work is considered as a very important component of quality of life not only in terms of standard of living, since it enables recognition, participation and social networks. For some scholars unemployment is considered an act of violence, since it attacks the physical and psychic-intellectual integrity, as well as the inviolacy of the persons affected. However, from the point of view of eudaimonistic ethics, labor is an essential aspect of quality of life only if it factually enables a decent life and promotes human flourishing. The main issue to be addressed from an ethical point of view is whether the act of violence consists in unemployment as such rather than in the social and personal consequences that unemployment currently brings about in a society based on the paradigm of labor. Nussbaum mentions the capability of control over one's own environment in terms of 'being able to hold property (land & movable goods), not just formally but in terms of real opportunity; having property rights on equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others'. Her focus is on the equality of chances rather than on the right

to 'work'. As long as gainful work is not only the capital means for keep poverty at bay, but also and even more importantly the vehicle for recognition, for the sense of one's own dignity, and for social participation, the access to it is to be considered a fundamental right in terms of capability. Advocates of Degrowth plead for a decoupling between paid work and income and for a more comprehensive definition of work, which encompasses beside gainful work also care work, voluntary work, and domestic work (see Hinterberger et al. 2009). This shift requires more than a change in the institutional and political system and cannot be successful if it does not address the issue of alternative forms of social recognition and public participation for all citizens. From the point of view of the capabilities approach this is a crucial issue of justice. By all citizens I do not only mean those who immediately identify with the ideals of a degrowth society and share the concept of a good life in terms of voluntary simplicity and self-sufficiency. Sometimes radical approaches convey the feeling of a paternalistic imposition of a particular concept of the good life onto others. Finally, with regards to the environmental Kuznet-curve the evidence suggests that the expected decoupling between resource impact and economic growth is not occurring on an absolute scale: while a relative increase in resource productivity (i.e. relative to production unit) has been registered, due to the well-known phenomenon of rebound and macro-rebound effect we are currently faced with a significant increase in the total consumption of resources. As Schneider among others has shown, this phenomenon is immanent to the logic of growth (Schneider 2008): investments in green technologies pay off if they lead to a market advantage due to reduced production costs and further to an increase in the demand of the new product. Moreover, most technologies are not 'viable' because that they cannot sustain themselves but rely on other processes, which on their part have a significant environmental impact (Gowdy 1997).

6 Conclusion

From the point of view of the capabilities approach what counts for justice is what people are actually capable of being and doing according to their conception of a good life. As I have shown this conception is not the same as the hedonic idea of arbitrary preferences to be satisfied but implies the critical and intersubjective scrutiny of the reasons why something is considered valuable. This approach requires an open field for deliberation and a public space where everyone can 'appear' and be seen and heard. How this field can and should be shaped is an essential question that needs further analysis, since Sen's proposals are not specific on this.

From the point of view of the capabilities-approach economic growth above a certain threshold does not seem to be a necessary condition for quality of life and for justice. Although it might help in certain cases supporting basic capabilities it also may lead to a significant reduction in the variety of opportunities and capabilities that people have. On the other hand degrowth seems to take more seriously the challenge of the capabilities-approach in so far as it focuses on quality of life and sets a 'good life' as a goal. However, some crucial questions about how to intend a 'good life' and who and why is supposed to have a say in the matter are still open and have to be addressed in the near future.

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