

How is degrowth possible?

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1. Growth versus universalism

In what sense is growth evil? We can say that it is iniquitous, unjust. Indeed it contradicts the principle which lays down the universal validity as criterion of value since it is good for some people but bad for a lot of other people. Nowadays we could say, referring to “Occupy Wall Street”, that growth is good for 1% of people but is evil for the remaining 99%. Growth being iniquitous is increasingly evident. It is clear as a matter of fact and it is becoming more and more evident also in principle.

As for the first side, in recent years in Western countries we have witnessed a dramatic deterioration in the living standard of middle classes, and we see nowadays that the distance between the rich and “average” people (people belonging to low and middle classes) is fast growing, not to mention the distance between the richest and the poorest. Someone can object that development, also if in a first time favours few people, in the long run extends its benefits (medical, technological etc.) to everybody. In some sense this is true, but in this regard two remarks are noteworthy. First remark. Growth causes an increasing distance between human beings, so that we can even see a split in mankind and suspect that some groups of men are not only in advance in comparison with the other human beings but just on a different road. In particular, the incredible technological development seems on the verge of creating a new kind of evolution and hence of giving birth to a new, post-human species that can prevent other human beings from developing in the same way (or in any case can rule and determine their evolution), so that we can even suspect that ‘normal’ men belong by now to a different evolutionary branch compared with the technologically advanced ones. Second remark. Even if the future scenery will not be that of a “new speciation”, should we admit that parity (equality) with other men is a primary need and an essential good for every man, then we had to admit that the current growth, even if in the long run is intended to extend its benefits to everybody, cannot in any case provide the essential good of parity and equity, and therefore of security, peace and satisfaction. In fact, it is increasingly clear that the current growth leads to a growing disparity between human individuals and between human groups. We might say, with a joke, that growth is primarily growth of inequality and injustice.

As for the second side, we are realizing that this kind of development *in principle* cannot become universal. We all know that if every people of the world could use a car, as happens in developed countries, in a short time the situation of the planet should become unsustainable and dramatic at least from an ecological point of view. But a conclusive evidence of that claim is the fact that the formidable technological development leads to a completely new situation, unimaginable until recently. One single example: it has now become reasonable to hypothesize that the life of a human being can be indefinitely prolonged; but it is unthinkable that this opportunity can be offered to every people of the world, since this would quickly lead to an increase of human population which certainly would not be sustainable. Just to put it again in playful tones, how could we support the economic burden of immortal retirees, if even now our pension systems are in trouble to keep up with retirees that die after few years of retirement?

So the problem is not only that *de facto* the benefits of growth are currently not evenly distributed among all persons, but also that we find it hard even to picture how such a thing could happen. Therefore, if we interpret the universalistic principle (in a way that we could perhaps call Kantian) as saying that it is right and just only what is valid for all human individuals (at least as a possibility), then it seems that this principle is incompatible with the current growth, and in particular with the technological growth. In short, the value of growth is not *universal* (it has not value for every men); so, to the extent that universalism is conceived to be a basic and necessary principle of human coexistence, we have to conclude that growth, since it violates this universalistic principle, is something contradictory which for this reason has necessarily to be overcome.

But we have to be cautious in drawing this conclusion from that observation. We can, certainly, infer that therefore growth is likely to go down, but from a rational point of view it is legitimate even the opposite conclusion, namely that it is the universal principle that is doomed to set.

Indeed, there are a lot of symptoms showing that we are in the presence of an impressive transformation of moral in a direction that violates the principle of equality between human beings. As we have seen, it is possible a scenery where differences between human beings become so huge to allow us to speak of a qualitative leap in the evolution of mankind. In fact we see that between men which have at their disposal formidable technological weapons and huge organizations, on the one hand, and simple individuals living in a primitive way (we can call them “stray men”, or “wandering, vagabond men”), on the other hand, the difference of might is almost similar to the difference there is between simple men and other animal species like chicken or pigs. We could understand very little of what is happening in the world if we would talk of animals in a generic way, without distinguishing between human beings and other animals; likewise we may have the suspicion that talking, nowadays, of human beings in general without specifying the organisms (i.e. the technologically characterized organizations) to which they belong turns out to be completely misleading.

2. Para-human minds and their projects about humanity

Therefore the key task of thought at present is to identify what are the real non-human “persons” (subjects, organizations, organisms) who determine what happens on earth. This “persons” include also human beings (and for this reason we can call them para- or meta-human beings), but their logic and their projects are not those of single human beings. For instance, the goal of a corporation (this name is revealing) that produces oil or weapons is quite different from the goals of single human beings, even of those who are members of it. Certainly it is possible that there are people who exploit such a “person” to achieve their own human goals, and it is possible that there are human individuals that understand and even project such “persons”, nevertheless normally there is a huge difference between the projects of these para-human (or meta-human) people (persons) and those of human individuals. And the autonomy of these organisms, especially after the arrival of computers, is fast growing.

So, when we interpret what is happening in the world we have to ask what are the projects currently existing, not only the projects of human beings but also those of non-human beings, i.e. of para- or meta-human beings. In particular we must be careful to avoid a peculiar mistake. Even when we criticize growth, we are easily led to take the point of view of its proponents, for instance we usually reason as humanity were fundamentally a big group made up of single human individuals constantly engaged in producing and exchanging wares. In a word, we reason as if the leading actors of the history were single human beings, or as if what is happening (in particular the actual growth) were the

outcome of the projects of single human individuals. So, seeing that what happens fits with the project of almost no human being, and surely does not match the hopes of mankind understood as the whole of human beings, we conclude that the development cannot go on in this way and hence it has necessarily to change. Well, it is true that in future reality will not match the intentions or the prophecies of the proponents of continuous growth, since this is contradictory (as we have seen, indeed, the growth cannot be to the benefit of all mankind), but this does not imply that we are about to witness a development where growth gives way to a right and just society.

It is worth emphasizing that the fact that what happens is not a human project does not mean that it is not a project at all. If we look carefully at what is happening we can easily see that it is just a “rational” plan, although it is not the project of a single human being, and although it has little to do with the wishes of the large majority of human persons. For instance, starting at least from the World War I, we can see the birth and the growth of an entity gradually gaining the full power on the earth, in particular by gaining the exclusive monopoly of military power. Even if we are not able to identify exactly “who” is this entity (which human individual are embedded in it), nevertheless we can undoubtedly see the arrival of such an entity. If, returning home, we find every day that our books have been moved so that all books of a colour are put together with the other books of the same colour (the red ones with red ones, and so on), we can be sure that there is somebody who is “rationally” making that operation even if we are not able to know who is making these changes. Likewise, when we see all countries in the world fall, one after the other, under the control and the domination of entities such as for instance IMF (International Monetary Fund), even if we do not know whether there is a human being that projects this (and in case “who” he/she is), it is however sure that it does not happen at random, there is a logic in this event and hence there is a “mind” behind it. Note that when we speak of a “mind” we do not necessarily refer to the mind of an individual human being; on the contrary, it seems likely that only a very little number of persons, and perhaps even no person at all, is able to really understand what is happening; nevertheless the process goes on relentlessly, just *as if* there were a “person” behind it. It may well be that it is no human mind, but in this case we have to conclude (without calling Martians in question) that there are rational beings that are not human beings.

In this regard we have to notice two main issues.

First. We can talk of “mind” also about entities different from individual human beings. An army is a “body” which has its own “mind”, and this does not coincide with the mind of one or more Generals, at most with a group of men; and it may well be that no single man has the right idea on what are the “decisions” that mind takes. Just in light of the fact that human minds are a relevant constituent of minds of this sort I call these minds “para- or meta-human minds”. In this sense there are a lot of para-human minds in the world, and these minds decide the fate of the world far more than any individual human mind.

Second. The para-human minds which dwell in the world belong to bodies (organisms) that are the results of the technical-instrumental development; or, better, the results of human organizations required by technical-instrumental development. For instance, the “mind” that programs and controls the railway network of a country is produced by the emergence of a technical tool as the locomotive. We could say that a technical artefact as the locomotive, coming into contact with humans beings and hence with the human society, generates a new “mind” which in some respects is very similar to a human mind but for other respects is quite different from it.

Usually we dogmatically assume that what happens in human history is the result of intentions and projects of merely human minds, and hence that human history is projected and realized only by individual human minds. Therefore, when we see that the outcomes

of the present system are completely inhuman, catastrophic or even apocalyptic, we think that they are the *involuntary* results of human projects, since we cannot believe that a single man can be so evil and so powerful to project and realize such a hell. So – this is usually our way of thinking – we believe that when men shall realize the disaster they are up to and shall understand that this is the opposite of what they want, they surely will decide to change their path. This way of reasoning is often applied also to the question of degrowth: the current model (way) of development is apocalyptic, so when human beings will realize this, they will decide to promote degrowth. This should be true, and should even be necessary, if actually the fate of humanity were decided by human beings (in fact they would not decide the contrary of what they wish); but if the “persons” who make decisions are not human persons, then it is well possible that they decide against humans wills (although it is important to point out that it is not necessary that para-human minds are hostile to human beings).

3. How is the degrowth project possible?

So the real problem is to see which are the para-human minds that exist nowadays on the face of the earth, and consequently which are the groups of human beings that are embedded in such organisms, and what is their role. Only when we can answer these questions and, on this basis, we understand what may be the possible projects of the para-human minds, we can decide what is bound to happen, or at least what is possible and what is not possible. Since degrowth is possible only as result of a conscious project, if minds are not only individual human minds, the main problem is how can human beings convince the meta-human minds that it is good to implement degrowth. And this is quite different from convincing human persons. Catastrophic or even apocalyptic sceneries (resources exhaustion, ecological disasters etc.) are surely a problem for human beings, but not for an entity which can be reasonably sure that “he/she” is able to survive the apocalypse. And hence it is possible that “apocalypse” is a minor problem even for those human beings which are embedded in these para-human organisms and identify themselves with such entities. Obviously the question is not so simple; since the para-human organisms are at least partially composed of human individuals the question arises of how the embedded human individuals can ‘eradicate’ (or at least separate) themselves from the rest of human population. The issue is complex, and at the current state there may be solutions which are very different from one another. However the point is that in order to really understand the current situation we need to identify what are the real historical subjects, i.e. the subjects that know and project life on earth as a whole, that is including also human forms of life; and in particular we need to identify such projects. It seems to me that usually the degrowth project presupposes humanity in general as historical subject, but it is far from being evident that humanity in general may be such a conscious and aware subject; and the problem is that the present humanity is more and more created and shaped by those biased, one-sided para-human minds.

What I want to emphasize is that we cannot correctly interpret what is happening in the world only taking into account the conscious projects of human beings or their unconscious, irrational or involuntary outcomes; this still remains an essential task, but we cannot see the real scenery without being aware of the projects about human beings made by para-human subjects.

Just one example. We all know the importance of the U.S. military-industrial complex, that now we can more appropriately call the military-technological complex. This is a subject which is really projecting our future, the future of whole mankind. Over the years this complex has expanded its influence and its guidance covers now all aspects of human life, from the political (foreign and domestic) to the economic (oil etc.) ones, from

the social (computer) to the cultural (films etc.) ones. It is now clear, after the military occupations of countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, that the army is not only charged with winning the wars, occupying the enemy territories and destroying any important country that is not considered a friend (i.e. subdued) nation, since also the following reconstruction is entirely (from the political, economic and cultural standpoint) carried out by the military forces and by their "intelligence" (in the sense of the Central Intelligence Agency) of the situation. Besides, recent studies have shown that a very small number of individuals rule the vast majority of all economic multinational corporations (banking, financial, industrial etc.). After all not only in U.S.A. the lobbies (of finance, media etc.) have by now the full control of political offices, from parliamentary posts to the presidency. So it is difficult to think that something relevant may happen in the world against the will of these subjects.

The point is that these subjects want to grow, and hence it is difficult to imagine that simple human beings will be able to realize degrowth. To this end we should either convince those subjects or fight them; but both hypotheses are extremely unlikely: on the one hand they are too interested in growing (and even forced to grow, since otherwise the other subjects, continuing to grow, would subdue them¹), and on the other hand only they have at their disposal the instruments (weaponry, money, media etc.) to fight and win. In addition to this, if the situation will evolve in such a way as to require a general degrowth, this will be led and ruled just by those subjects, and not by "civil" organizations, not to mention the "stray men". If, for instance, a sudden ecological catastrophe will strike the earth, it will be the military to handle this situation, and certainly not the kindergarten or music teachers. Indeed somebody thinks that just for this reason some of those subjects are arranging such catastrophic situations.

4. A paradigm shift

Spiritual change plus power equalization

This confirms that degrowth requires, as however its proponents know and state, a deep intellectual change: it needs a real paradigm shift. In particular we have to come to terms with the fact that power is not an accidental drawback in human history, it is rather an essential trait of human nature and hence of natural history on the earth. I mean that the desire to control living beings and to use them to get satisfaction constitutes an essential characteristic of human being. It has traditionally been limited by the fact that till now no subject could attempt to subjugate the human beings without paying a too high price. But the technological development has radically changed the situation. In the military operations that are underway in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq (and that improperly we call "war") the ratio between technologically armed and local victims tends to the final target of 0 to n (any number). For instance, during the "Cast Lead" operation in Gaza (2008-2009) for every dead Israelis there have been 100 dead Palestinians; these are numbers that make this kind of operations being more like a "pest control" against non-human animals than like a war between human military organizations. The problem is that in this case the "animals" are real human beings. As correctly Serge Latouche argues², degrowth requires a deep change in our mental and spiritual development. It evidently requires stopping the logic of war and violence, and most of all overcoming the natural

¹ In some sense, indeed, growth is necessary; for instance because the money supply is realized through debt, and hence we are *forced* to pay debts. On this issue one can see Marco Della Luna books, in particular: M. Della Luna – A. Miclavez, *Euroschiavi. Chi si arricchisce davvero con le nostre tasse? La Banca d'Italia, la grande frode del debito pubblico e i segreti del signoraggio*, Macro Edizioni, Cesena (FC), 2007.

² See, for instance, the recent: S. Latouche, *Per un'abbondanza frugale. Malintesi e controversie sulla decrescita*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2012.

tendency to gain power over other living beings. But it is absolutely unlikely that a so deep revolution may happen in a short period of time, all the more so because in this period the transformation of humans will be led by those who possess the power and hence are less interested in a transformation of this kind. And in the meanwhile the technological evolution will force humans to drastic and sudden choices. So, as well as a mental and spiritual change (which however remains absolutely essential) a great work of equalization of power should be necessary, and in a short time. This should happen in every field: military, political, economic, financial etc. And this equalization is not less indispensable than the spiritual transformation: they are two sides of the same coin. The philosophical practices, such as I see them³, have to hold together these two different sides.

Few examples in order to show how radical this transformation in our way of thinking must be.

The “comprehension” of para-human subjects

When we speak of a change of mentality, we think for instance to a way of thinking that take due account of women thought and experiences; in addition to this we realize that it is necessary an ecological way of thinking that includes also non human animals in our sphere of attention and consideration; and all this is quite essential. But usually this broadening of the horizon is limited to a glance looking at past epochs and at well-known (human and non-human) animal individuals; almost never we are able to perceive and discern the new (post-human) forms of life that have made their appearance on earth and are now treating humans more or less as we treat traditional animals (chicken, pigs and so on). The required revolution in our perspective involves the ability to include also post-human beings in our comprehensive glance. It is relatively easy for a well-educated person to have a positive attitude towards other, ‘inferior’ (i.e., non-threatening) forms of life, but it is far more difficult to have a positive and “comprehensive” (hence in some way also sympathetic) attitude towards ‘superior’ forms of life, i.e. towards the “big animals” (animal much greater the humans) that are growing on the earth. But just this is the present challenge, since post-human subjects are not necessarily worse than human beings.

Critic of capitalism and, together, of the *notion* of capitalism

When we speak of the current system, we usually describe it as “capitalism”. It is almost impossible to criticize the political and economic system without using the words and the conceptual framework imposed by Marx. His theory is really a great one, but nowadays this notion (capitalism) is far from having a real explanatory power. It presupposes in any case the primacy and hence a sort of privilege of the economic dimension, while at present time it becomes clear that the basis of economy is technological-military power. In particular the Marxist theory assumes that the profit is due to the surplus of value (*plusvalore*) generated by human work. This presupposes that the value of an object depends fundamentally on human beings. Well, we have to recognize that, on the one hand, the profit is based on the appropriation of valuable material which *per se* does not require any human work (like water, for instance), and hence on the power to maintain possession of these valuable materials (and this is essentially a military power). On the other hand, the non natural and innovative (artificial) value of products depends on technological instruments rather than on human work as such. So the worker is not the real counterpart of the capitalist, since the main contradiction (if we still want to

³ R. Màdera – L.V. Tarca, *Philosophy as Life Path. An Introduction to Philosophical Practices*, IPOC, Milan 2007 (Italian edition: *La filosofia come stile di vita. Introduzione alle pratiche filosofiche*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2003).

use this jargon) is not between capitalist and workers, but between technologically and military advanced apparatus and traditional human beings. From a certain point of view we could say that both wage workers and capitalists are proponents of the growth (although with a different status and different privileges), while the real problem is the contrast of the world of military and technological growth with the rest of human beings. Or, perhaps, the main contradiction is between the technological-artificial elements of apparatus and their properly human components. Marxism presupposes the value of human being and of his work; nowadays this is problematic, and cannot act as an assumption; just as it is a problem that history may be the result of projects made simply by human minds. To day human being as such is a much devalued resource; and this is a major problem for humanity.

Rethinking democracy: sovereignty and *equipotenza*⁴ (“might equity”)

Another notion that the present interpretation of the situation forces us to rethink is the notion of democracy. When we see that the subjects that rule the world are not simple human beings, we understand that the notion of democracy itself has to be rethought, since it is based on the presupposition that human beings have the sovereignty.

Degrowth presupposes a general (planetary) agreement on it, otherwise nations which degrow will be subdued by nations which continue to grow. So degrowth presupposes a fair worldwide governance. This requires a deep modification of international institutions like UN, which are based on the growth (especially military growth) imposed and ruled by a very small group of nations (the nations who won World War II); and this, on turn, is possible only if we radically rethink the notion of democracy itself and, by this, the fundamental concepts ruling our approach to reality and to social life. But the problem is even more complicate, since it is far from being obvious that the real “subjects” which rule the world are nations. Rather, national states are on turn devices that are used and ruled by external entities (lobbies and similar). So a major problem is the relation between natural human beings and para-human organizations. It is naive to think that actual democratic (or postdemocratic) institutions are able to grant single human individuals to play a significant role in the decisions which regard them.

Just one point to show this. The main merit of democracy is the fact that it ensures that the power is automatically returned to citizens (who in principle have the sovereignty) without any need to make a revolution, and this is made possible through periodic elections. The main current problem of democracy is that only a fraction of power is returned to people through elections; so democracy has lost its own worth. For instance, the power of money supplying is never at stake, and some scholars believe that this is the central issue in contemporary politics⁵.

Democracy, indeed, risks becoming one of the worst superstitions of our time. A very great problem is that democracy is usually considered as something *unconditionally* good, while it is only *conditionally* good: it is good *under conditions*.

Very briefly, I mean that the same word (democracy) may mean quite different or even opposite things. It is a word just like “Christian”: not many centuries ago, being Christian might mean quite different things (e.g.): a) being follower of Jesus Christ’s commandment to love even enemies; but also, instead b) backing the practice of capturing and punishing heretics (I refer here to the Inquisition). On these conditions, assuming being Christian as unconditionally good implied the possibility of judging good the practice of torturing and killing people. Similarly, nowadays being democratic may mean quite

⁴ “Equipotenza” = “uguaglianza di potenza”; i.e. equality (parity) of might (“might equity”).

⁵ One can see the above mentioned Marco Della Luna.

different or even opposite things; as for example: a) considering each person as sovereign (and hence respecting his freedom to speech, and so on); or b) assuming that who has managed to seize power through elections has the right to impose even by force his/her decisions to other people. So, the major question is to detect the conditions under which democracy is something good rather than evil; in particular the conditions under which democracy unifies individuals in a free way instead of promoting a huge growth of power and injustice. And it is important to understand that it is contradictory to pretend to decide just through the very democratic method what are the conditions that make democracy good rather than evil.

A new way of thinking

So we have to distinguish positive from negative features of democracy, and this requires that we are able to distinguish in general positive from negative. But this is not an easy task since it requires a new philosophical perspective, able to distinguish difference from negation and thereby, in general, the positive from the non-negative. Indeed, if we want to distinguish the positive from the negative we have to distinguish the positive from the non-negative too; because the non-negative, being negative of the negative, remains negative and so reproduces the negative it has the pretension to negate. So, while the positive is usually interpreted as non-negative, the true positive differs both from negative and non-negative, and thereby the true difference between positive and negative is a *pure* difference (and hence the positive is *pure* positive).

Only on the basis of this kind of 'logic' can we really distinguish peace (the positive) from the negative which war is, since we distinguish peace not only from war but also from non-war. Indeed non-war (the suspension of military activity) may mean two quite different things: a consensual agreement (the true peace) or, on the contrary, the military annihilation of one of the two enemies (and this situation remains a negative). So, in general this 'logic' allows us to distinguish the purely positive politics (the development which construct peaceful relations even with the post-human subjects) from the struggle against power (the negation of that negative constituted by power and growth), which remains a form of power since counter-power is a facet of power (just as the non-negative is a facet of the negative). So true freedom is, rather than counter-power, *equipotenza* ("might equality"), that is: on the one hand equality in might or in strength (because power is the asymmetry, or imbalance, in might), but on the other hand also *equity*, i.e. *fairness* and *justice*, in the use of might and strength. What has actually to degrow are disparities and inequalities in terms of might in all fields (military, economical, cultural etc); if they continue to grow, not even the exhaustion of the energy resources will lead to a better situation for the majority of human beings.

Back now again to the question of degrowth on this philosophical basis, which I have exposed in my books⁶, we can summarize the content of the discourse in a formal way, saying:

- *Growth* is unjust (it is symptom of the logic of conflict and power, which contradicts the universalistic principle); hence it is *negative*.
- As negative, it is *necessary*. It is necessary because even its negation (the non-negative) is negative, since the non-negative is the negative towards the negative itself. In fact *ne-cessity* (Latin: *ne-cedo*) is the negation (*ne-*) of the negative (*cedo* = I surrender); hence it is non-negative.

⁶ In addition to *Philosophy as Life Path*, above mentioned, one can see: *Differenza e negazione. Per una filosofia positiva*, La Città del Sole, Napoli 2001; e *Quattro variazioni sul tema negativo/positivo. Saggio di composizione filosofica*, Ensemble '900, Treviso 2006.

- But as it is necessary, growth is *contradictory*, because as *ne-cessity* it is non-negative, but thereby (as negative of negative) it is negative.
- So the purely positive alternative to growth (can we call it *degrowth?*) is different both from the negative (growth) and non-negative (non-growth); it differs both from necessity and non-necessity, both from negative and non-negative (can we therefore name it “frugal abundance”?); it is hence *pure* difference towards negative, and then pure positive. It is the *purely-possible positive destiny*⁷ of humanity.

In order to achieve such a philosophical perspective, we have to mix together Western and Eastern wisdom and philosophy. In particular we can refer to Raimon Panikkar⁸, a great scholar who has built a bridge between East and West, *inter alia* by proposing a peculiar interpretation of the notion of *advaita*, that in my opinion (but I have discussed with him this point) is very similar to the ‘logic’ I have here briefly presented⁹.

⁷ Note that the notion of “possible destiny” is, *within a negative point of view*, immediately contradictory; therefore I write “purely-possible [...] destiny”. After all also the form “frugal abundance” *within a negative perspective* sounds like a contradiction.

⁸ R.Panikkar, *Opera omnia*, Jaca Book, Milano 2008 -, voll. I-XII.

⁹ L.V.Tarca, *Raimon Panikkar and Western Rationality*, in Kala Acharya, Milena Carrara Pavan, William Parker (Editors), *Fullness of Life*, Somaiya Publications Pvt.Ltd, Mumbai-New Delhi, 2008, pp. 309-351.