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Editorial

Degrowth

The publication of the proceedings of the April 2008 international conference in Paris dedicated to degrowth constitutes, as of now, the richest and most complete collection analysing various aspects of the subject. Though the matter has been mooted for quite some time, the term Degrowth has only recently been used in economic and social debates, even if the origin of the ideas that it covers has a relatively old history. The expression does not appear as such in any dictionary of social sciences before 2006, where one finds however entries on related themes such as "Zero Growth", "Sustainable Development" and of course "Steady State" [1]. While the translation of the French Décroissance by Degrowth has still to meet with unanimous approval, the project to which it answers already enjoys a relatively long and complex history and has not been without its impact on economic analysis and social policy.

1. A provocative slogan

Let us immediately specify that degrowth is not a concept, and in any case, not one that is symmetrical to growth. It is a political slogan with theoretical implications. The watchword of degrowth especially has an aim to strongly signal the abandonment of the target of growth for the sake of growth, a foolish objective whose engine is precisely the unrestrained search for profit by the holders of capital, and whose consequences are disastrous for the environment. Rigorously, it would be best to speak about "a-growth", as one speaks about atheism. It actually means quite precisely, the abandonment of a religion: the religion of the economy, growth, progress and development.

As a slogan, the term D*écroissance* is a happy rhetorical discovery, because its significance is not completely negative, in particular in French. Just as the abatement of a devastating flood is a good thing. It works rather well in the other Latin languages: Decrescita (Italian), Decrecimiento (Spanish), Decreixement (Catalan). The denotation is the same, the connotations are rather close. To degrow, one needs to disbelieve and the proximity of the vocabulary of belief and growth, in French, are found there. On the other hand, its translation into Germanic languages poses major problems. The difficulty we have found in translating "décroissance" into English is symmetrical, to some extent, to that of translating growth or development into African languages (but also naturally, of translating degrowth…). It is very revealing of the cultural imagination, in this context the intellectual domination of economic reductionism.

The translation of "décroissance" is not only problematic but symbolic of a deep paradigmatic divide. My friend Michael Singleton, an English anthropologist teaching at Louvain-la-neuve and connoisseur of the subject writes: "I looked in my Roget's Thesaurus, but the names aren't there to express this 'cool down, take it easy, slack off, relax man' included in the sense of degrowth. 'Decrease' exists, but it is too exotic and essentialist (product more than process) to capture the meaning. I sometimes ask myself if terms like 'decreasing, diminishing, moderating' could not be useful. 'To grow or not to grow – that is the question!' 'Moderate/Moderating Growth'? One could always quite simply leave 'décroissance' in the text, with an explanation in footnotes. I wonder whether the best translation would not be 'decreasing growth'" – that has the advantage of being at the same time passive (a simple fact) and active: it is, well, necessary to decrease; it is necessary to decrease well; (here 'decreasing' would correspond to a societal project or better still, to a true Social Project). If one wants to make a standard form of it: 'the decreasing' is undoubtedly a little longer and heavier than 'décroissance' but nevertheless it means what we want to say. Without getting into overly embarrassing semantics, the Dutchman Willem Hoogendijk, in a book written in English, *The Economic Revolution: Towards a sustainable future by freeing the economy from money making* [2] made a true theory of economic decrease using the words *shrinking* and *shrinkage*.

The term "décroissance" was used in French to entitle a collection of essays by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen on entropy, ecology and the economy [3]. However the word used by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen is *declining*, a word which does not really bring out what we understand by degrowth, no more than *decrease*, proposed by others. The neologisms, *ungrowth*, *degrowth*, *dedevelopment*, are hardly more satisfactory. In German: Schrumpfung or Minuswachstum is also problematic. In English "downsfhifting" (displacement downwards) is the term used by those who choose voluntary simplicity. It translates the subjective slope correctly. "Counter-growth" proposed by others would translate the objective side. The prefix Ent (meaning De- in German) according to François Schneider, can also be added in German, to Wachstum (Growth in German). One also speaks in the Anglo-Saxon countries about "uneconomic growth", growth with negative impact. Some proposed again "way down", "powerdown" (title of a book by Richard Heinberg which promotes a message rather close to that of degrowth). Yet others have proposed as a translation: "contraction" and "downscaling".

The latest large society of *Western* growth, Japan, is an interesting case. My Japanese translator wrote me that: "presenting the project of décroissance/decrescita, I use the word "decrescendo" (the same pronunciation as in French and Italian). In Japan, "decrescendo" is well known in the field of music, and I thought that the word could be used to translate degrowth into Japanese, because that makes it possible to transmit the message. Another merit is

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that the word does not imply the growth which results in the Japanese word "Seichou". In Japanese, there is a profusion of vocabulary to bring out the idea of another growth, like another development; for example, "datsu-Seichou (de-growth)", "jizokukanouna-Seichou ("sustainable growth)", "ningenno-tameno-Seichou (human growth)". All these expressions have economic growth at the heart of their concept. I think the Japanese word "decrescendo" makes it possible to distinguish the project of degrowth from projects of another growth without conceptual confusion".

For non Western societies, the problem is simpler; post-development and the critique of growth (which fundamentally call westernization into question) cannot be put under the banner of degrowth, it would be absurd. However, alternate banners are not lacking. In this search for collective self-fulfillment, a search for material wellbeing that destroys the environmental and social ties would not be given priority. The objective of the good life is played out in multiple ways according to their contexts. In other words, it is a question of rebuilding/rediscovering new cultures. If a name must absolutely be given to it, this objective can be called the *umran* (flowering) as by Ibn Kaldûn; *swadeshi-sarvodaya* (improving the social conditions of all), as by Gandhi; *bamtaare* (to be well together) as by Toucouleurs; or *Fidnaa/Gabbina* ("The radiance of a well-fed and carefree person[2]) as with the Borana of Ethiopia [4]. The important thing is to disassociate with the society of destruction which is perpetuated under the banner of development or, today of globalization. These original creations, which one can find here and there marking the beginnings of realization, bring hope of a post-development era.

If the perfect literal translation is impossible, it is also not necessarily desirable. Post-development after all is necessarily plural. Each society, each culture, must leave totalitarian productivism in its own way, and oppose the unidimensional man, *homo economus*, an identity based on diversity of roots and traditions.

2. History of the process

The process of the development of an autonomous and thrifty society which hides behind the slogan of degrowth was not born yesterday. "We have the conviction", wrote the authors of the report of the Club of Rome in 1972, "that an awakening to the material limits of the world environment and the tragic consequences of an unreasoned exploitation of the earth resources is essential to the emergence of new modes of thought which will lead to a fundamental revision, both of the behaviour of men, and, consequently, the structure of today's society as a whole" [5]. At the same time, the failure of development in the South and the loss of a framework of reference in the North has led several thinkers to call the consumer society into question and its imaginary foundations, progress, science and technology. The project of degrowth thus, has a double parenthood. It was formed, on one hand, in the awakening to the ecological crises and on the other, from the school of criticism of technology and development.

Degrowth and the bio-economy: In 1972, the Frenchman René Dubos published a work titled "We have only one earth". He was the originator of the Stockholm Conference which marked the starting point of interest by the governments of the planet in the environment. The same year, Sicco Mansholt, then Vice-President of the European commission, wrote a public letter to the then President, Franco-Maria Malfatti, recommending that he think about stopping growth! On becoming President of the Commission, Sicco Mansholt repeated his plea "For us in the industrialized world, a decrease in the material level of our life has become a necessity. Which does not mean zero growth, but negative growth. Growth is only an immediate political objective serving the interests of the dominant minorities" [6].

Intuition of the limits of economic growth undoubtedly goes back to Malthus; however, it finds its scientific base with Sadi Carnot and his second law of thermodynamics; Among the pioneers it is appropriate to highlight Serguei Podolinsky, in particular, an energy economics author who sought to reconcile socialism and the environment [7]; however, it was in the same 1970s that the ecological question within economics was developed, particularly by the great scientist and Romanian economist, Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen.

Adopting the model of traditional Newtonian mechanics, Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen noted that economics excludes the irreversibility of time. Economic models occur in a mechanical and reversible time. They ignore entropy, i.e. the irreversibility of matter and energy conversions. By eliminating the earth from production functions, around 1880, the ultimate bond with nature was broken. Any reference to any underlying biophysical bases has disappeared, and economic production such as it is conceived by most neo-classic theorists, does not seem to be confronted by any ecological limits. The result is an unconscious wasting of the scarce resources available and an underutilization of the abundant flow of solar energy. Again, as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen notes, waste and pollution, produced by economic activity do not enter into the standard production functions. This shows the impossibility of infinite growth in a finite world and the need to create a bio-economics, i.e. to think of the economy within the biosphere. With respect to a return to the classical stationary state, Georgescu-Roegen rejects the mechanical character of their neo-classical vision and in certain cases, for him, it would be advisable to organize a true retreat from withdrawals from stocks of resources.

Degrowth and post-development: For more than forty years, a small anti or post developmentalist "international", associated with Ivan Illich, Jacques Ellul and François Partant, has analyzed and denounced the misdeeds of development, especially with respect to the enterprise of the North towards the South [8]. This criticism initially touched on the *historical alternative*, i.e. the auto-organisation of first native societies/economies. Admittedly, they were also interested in the alternative initiatives in the North (the social and solidarity economy, third sector, etc.), LETS (Systems of local exchange), NEAP (Network of exchanges of alternative and solidarity practices), etc. but not with a societal "alternative". The sudden and relative success of our long preaching in the desert, in particular, because of the crisis of the environment, but also because of the emergence of globalization, led us to look further into its implications on the economy and society of the North. Development once requalified, is a serious concern, indeed as much for the North as for the South, and the danger from growth which is planetary. Degrowth is not the alternative, but a matrix of alternatives which re-opens a space for creativity by raising the heavy blanket of economic totalitarianism.

The theoretical reflection on post-development, which crawled along in France in a quasi underground way between 1972 (the great era of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Ivan Illich and André Gorz) and 2002 (the year of the UNESCO conference – *"Undo Development, Remake the World"*), very clearly anticipated the crisis of the globalized market society and proposed a positive exit path: the construction of a democratic and ecologically autonomous society, the society of degrowth. The crisis envisaged and denounced indeed, is not only financial, economic, social, and ecological, it is also, and more profoundly, cultural and civilisational.

3. Analytical and political scope

The construction of a society of degrowth certainly must pass through the demystification of GDP, the fetish index of modern

wellbeing, the fight against the negative externalities of growth and the implementation of virtuous circles of voluntary simplicity. It is advisable then to specify the contours of what a society of "non-growth" could be. This supposes a drastic reduction in the negative externalities of growth and rests on the organization of virtuous circles of degrowth.

Degrowth and measurement of wellbeing: In keeping with Jean-Baptiste Say who defined happiness as consumption, Ian Tinbergen once proposed purely and simply to rename GNP, GNH (Gross National Happiness). It is easy to demystify this claim and to show that the GNP measures only commercial "richness" and that which one can acquire. Robert E. Lane, in his remarkable book *"The loss of happiness in Market Democracies"* [9], outlines all the possible crosscutting theories of accounting, which are designed to seek to measure, despite all, the evolution of personal happiness (subjective well-being) in the liberal societies. His conclusion is that the progress of the material level of life in the United States was accompanied by an indisputable fall in real happiness for the majority of Americans, which would be primarily due to effective degradation of fundamental human relations (what Lane calls *companionship*) [10]. The known indicators of wellbeing, IHD (Index of Human Development), Herman Daly's Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), Robert Putnam's indicator of social health (ISS), the calculation of green GDP or P.I.D. ("Produit Intérieur Doux"; the "Soft Domestic Product" of the Québécois), integrate corrections concerning "defensive" expenditures, linked to the deterioration of quality of life (water and air pollution, harmful acoustic effects, alternating migration, road accidents, urban crime, loss of wetlands and non-renewable resources, or with accounting for unpaid domestic work). If one begins with the graphs of the evolution of GDP and ISS (Indicator of Social Health of Robert Punam) or of GPI (Genuine Progress Indicator of Herman Daly), one sees that beginning in the 1970's in the United States, the tendencies diverge. Whereas the GDP continues on its trend of growth, both other indices start an increasingly marked decline. Well-being decreases while "well-having" grows [11]. "The so-called economics of Well-Being, are actually, as Patrick Viveret wrote, an economy of "Much-Having". "The day when we count our destruction within our famous GDP", notes Bernard Maris, "we are likely to find ourselves quite poor! [12]".

The content of degrowth: Obviously, it is not about a caricatural inversion which would consist of preaching degrowth for degrowth. Specifically, degrowth is not negative growth, a paradoxical expression and absurdity which represents the domination of our imagination by growth [13]. It is known that the simple deceleration of growth plunges our societies into distress because of unemployment and the abandonment of the social, cultural and environmental programs which ensure a minimum quality of life. One can imagine what a catastrophe a negative growth rate would be! Just as there is nothing worse than a workers' society without work, there would be nothing worse than a society of growth without growth. This is what condemns the institutional left to social-liberalism, a lack of daring to decolonize the imagination. Degrowth is thus possible only in a "society of degrowth".

Degrowth and steady state: If degrowth is not a resumption of the old classical theory of the Steady state, one nevertheless finds in John Stuart Mill an "ethics of the stationary or Steady state" which anticipates some of our ideas. "It will only be", he wrote, "when, with good institutions, humanity is guided by judicious precaution, that the conquests made over the forces of nature by the intelligence and energy of scientific explorers will become the common property of the species and a means of improving and the fate of all". There is, as suggested by Lahsen Abdelmalki and Patrick Mundler, a standpoint not far from "the merry austerity" suggested by authors like Ivan Illich or Andre Gorz, i.e. a model of society where the needs and work time are reduced, but where social life is richer, because it is more convivial" [14].

"The population and capital", writes J.S. Mill, "are the only great things which must remain constant in a world in balance. All human activities, which do not involve unreasonable irreplaceable material consumption or which do not degrade the environment in an irreversible manner, could develop indefinitely. In particular, those activities that are regarded as most desirable and most satisfactory: education, art, religion, basic research, sports, and human relations, could flourish" [15]. However, for Mill, the theory of the steady state translates the idea that in aging, by its own dynamics, capitalism will, little by little, give rise to a kind of society whose values will be more respectful of man and nature. However, we think that nothing but a rupture with the capitalist system, its consumerism and its productivism, can avoid catastrophe. Because its design remains that of a capitalist system, even without growth, Mill was able to be restored by proponents of sustainable development.

Given that, the process of building autonomous and thrifty convivial societies arises in different ways in the North and in the South. In the South, degrowth of the ecological footprint (even of the GDP) is neither necessary nor desirable, but we do not have to conclude it is necessary to build a society of growth or to not leave it, if one has already entered there. Let us be clear. Degrowth of the ecological footprint in the North (and thus of the GDP) is a necessity; it is not at the beginning an ideal, nor the single objective of a society of post-development and another possible world. But let us make a virtue out of necessity, and conceive of degrowth as an objective which one can draw advantages from. At first approximation, one can conceive of a policy of degrowth as having as an objective to reverse the wedge between production of well being and GDP. It is a question of uncoupling or disconnecting the improvement of the situation of private individuals from a statistical rise in material production, in other words to decrease "well-having" to improve the "well-being".

A policy of degrowth could initially consist of reducing or even eliminating the negative externalities of growth, which range from road accidents to expenditures on drugs to reduce stress. A questioning of the considerable volume of transport of men and goods on the planet, with the corresponding negative impact on the environment (thus a "relocalization" of the economy), the equally considerable cacophony of often harmful advertising, the accelerated obsolescence of products and disposable gadgets without other justification than making the infernal mega-machines spin faster, will provide important reserves for a *degrowth* in material consumption. The only impacts on our standard of living of the majority of our proposed reductions on the biosphere thus, can only result in increased well-being.

One can synthesize all this into a program of 8 Rs: To Revalue, Reconceptualize, Restructure, Relocate, Redistribute, Reduce, Re-use, Recycle. These eight interdependent objectives are likely to engage a virtuous circle of serene, convivial and sustainable degrowth [16].

4. Conclusion

Even if, because of the diversity of sources and angles of approach, all the contributions in this collection of contributions do not come from the same degree of radicalism, the analysis of the "partisans" of degrowth or the "objectors to growth" is distinguishable from the analyses and positions of other criticisms of the contemporary globalized economy (the alter-globalization movement or the solidarity economy), which may not place the heart of the problem in neo or ultra-liberalism, or what Karl Polanyi called the formal economy, but in the logic of growth perceived as

the fuel of efficiency. It is not a question of substituting a "good economy" for a "bad", a *good* growth or a *good* development with a bad one by repainting them in green, or social, or equitable, with a more or less strong dose of official regulation, or hybridization by the logic of gifts and solidarity, but a question *of just leaving* the economy. This formula, is generally misunderstood because it is difficult, for our contemporaries, to become aware that the economy is a religion. When we say that, to speak in a rigorous way, one should speak about a-growth the same way than one speaks about atheism, it means precisely that; to become atheists of growth and the economy. Of course, like any human society, a society of degrowth will have to organize production for its life, and for this reason to reasonably use the resources of its environment and to consume them through tangible properties and services, but a little like those societies of abundance in the Stone Age described by Marshall Salhins, which never entered the economy [17]. It will not be done in the iron corset of scarcity, out of needs, in economic calculations or by *homo œconomicus*. These imaginary bases of the economic institution must be called into question. Rediscovered frugality makes it possible to rebuild a society of abundance on the basis of what Ivan Illich called "modern subsistence", i.e. "the lifestyle in a post-industrial economy within which people succeed in reducing their dependence on the market, and reach that point while protecting - by political means - an infrastructure in which technology and tools are useful first and foremost to create practical values, which are unquantified and unquantifiable by the professional manufacturers of needs" [18].

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[6] Mansholt, Sicco, 1974. La crise. Stock. p. 166–167. That same year, René Dumont declared: "No! Indefinite growth is impossible…If we maintain the actual rate of expansion of the population and industrial production until the next century, it will not end without the total collapse of our civilisation" Dumont, René, 1974. À vous de choisir, L'écologie ou la mort. Pauvert.
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[11] Two Swedish researchers, Jackson and Stymne got similar results to those of H. Daly for Germany, the UK, Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden.
[12] Maris, Bernard, 2003. Antimanuel d'économie. éditions Bréal. Les fourmis 1, 290.
[13] Which means literally: "advance while retreating".
[14] Quoted by Franck-Dominique Vivien, Jalons pour une histoire de la notion de développement durable, p. 3. in "Mondes en développement N° 121", 2003/1.
[15] Principes d'économie politique, 1953. Dalloz. 297.
[16] One could lengthen the list of Rs with: radicalize, reconvert, refine, redimension, remodel, rethink, etc., but all these Rs are more or less included in the first eight. See our "Petit traité de la décroissance sereine" Mille et une nuits, Paris 2007.
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