

**Giacomo D’Alema – Federico Demaria – Giorgos Kalis (eds.):
De-Growth. A Vocabulary for a New Era
New York, Routledge 2015, 248 p.**

Degrowth as a New Political Economy Paradigm

The book is unique both in providing a comprehensive picture of the new concept of *degrowth* and in the way it was edited. While both the introduction and the conclusion demonstrate a significant shift in the general understanding of the problem, the editors also did an excellent job of selecting and arranging the subject, presented by fifty authors and divided it into four thematic units, and ordered the contents logically, smoothly and in a complementary fashion.

The concept of degrowth is a seed of the future in the present, which seems to be hopeless and full of doomsday scenarios. With the changing picture of the world, quantum mechanics introduces new unprecedented notions such as non-locality and nonlinearity. There is an entirely new paradigm of holistic thinking emerging. Information field, which combines quantum and galaxies into physical universe and cells and organisms into biosphere, also brings together the brains and minds of individuals in sociosphere. The Akashic field, called the collective unconscious by Carl G. Jung and noosphere by Teilhard de Chardin, constitutes a human information bank, says the author of one of the Club of Rome reports Ervin Laszlo in his work (Laszlo 2007). And there is also a new green economy and bio-economy, pioneered by the mathematician-economist Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen (1971). The most significant achievement of the concept of bioeconomics is a methodological grip on the laws of economy, the old-new issue since the English classical political economy. Economic processes have both a physical and a biological basis; they cannot thus ignore the laws of physics, including the law of thermodynamics. The current stagnation, or rather “cumulative decline” (Streeck 2014), commonly referred to as “Crisis”, outlines two civilizational alternatives: either the disaster in case of positive feedback or homeostasis as a tangible outcome of successful coping with the negative feedback. As long as the negative feedback operates through cyclical fluctuations, it always implies the possibility of regress. Hence, the only true “progress” is due to the ability of human society to maintain *negentropy* through culture. Life – more than anything else – can prevent the accretion of entropy because, in order to increase organization and differentiation, a living structure always assimilates new materials and energy. This is an example of a functioning negative feedback, which prevents the build-up of entropy by maintaining homeostasis. Georgescu-Roegen, however, did not treat this concept in a naturalistic manner; he emphasised that economic laws are always formed under certain conditions determined by culture and operate in a gi-

ven institutional framework, which is the underlying cause of social and environmental unsustainability of the Western economic model.

Meanwhile, mainstream economic sciences dramatically lack holistic thinking. The majority fail to realize that soon everything will be different – activities, relationships, use of energy, the ratio between paid and unpaid work. The main objective of the concept of degrowth is not to make the elephant leaner, but to convert it into a snail, i.e., the goal is fundamental transformation. The crisis in the context of global stagnation, which has persisted since 2008, is a proof that standard recipes of classical economics, be it Keynesian or monetarist, are simply dysfunctional. The whole issue is about people and not about things or economic variables or mathematical models. What we badly need is a new political economy of new ways of wealth creation to replace capitalism because continued accumulation with the resulting growth is utterly unsustainable. The fetish of economic growth, full employment, but also of the welfare state, persists only in the inertia thinking of politicians, who can only see as far as the short-term horizon of reelection. To an economist, the notion of degrowth seems pointless as economy cannot but grow. And he is right here, for green phantasies of zero growth are merely an unrealistic utopia. Why, then, “de-growth”, when economy has no other option but to function (evolve, thrive) somehow? There are a number of arguments. Some of the enlightened ones realize the limits of growth while others would like to overcome stagnation by maintaining prosperity without growth. Revolutionaries would like a society, which would replace capitalist expansion and exploitation. Moderate reformists muse about a good life (*buen vivir*) as contingent on change, for growth per se cannot guarantee quality life. Orthodox neoliberals are actually extreme conservatives, who fight for hegemony, wielding a doctrine that is as far from reality as was the doctrine of advanced socialist society in its days. Independent environmental activists, including unorthodox neoliberals think of survival strategies within the confines of lifeboat economy, which forces them to accept the change to a more or less limited extent.

The concept of degrowth can draw on the lifeboat model, only the required changes are of a radical paradigmatic nature. The authors of the introductory essay present degrowth as a revolutionary idea, which implies both a critique of the concept of GDP and a condemnation of commodification (neoliberalism goes too far in its effort to commodify everything and everyone). The idea of degrowth one way or another faces the risk of losing its original significance and of becoming merely a new version of production and consumption (consuming much less than they do today in the first-world countries), or of dissolving itself in some post-concept of society where everyone wins. True, authentic social changes towards de-growth will take place in a complex matrix of different political strategies, both opposition and reformist. Currently, degrowth primarily constitutes a criticism of growth because from a certain level upwards, the latter cannot guarantee

happiness. Society will use fewer natural resources and will work on other organizational principles than economism or utilitarian calculus. The key words are *sharing, simplicity, conviviality, care, commons. Eco-communities, online-communities and cooperatives* will be supported by new government institutions based on the share of labour and of basic or maximum income. The transition from productivity to conviviality is a transition from a shortage economy to a *gift economy*. Convivial production instead of standardized production of the industrial era will encourage personal creativity and collaborative Innovation) (M. Deriu).

The point is not only a reduction in GDP, although this will take place, too. Green community welfare economics can ensure a good life, but it cannot ensure a three-percent annual growth. What will advance in the first place are child-rearing and education, health care and renewable energy, while the financial sector and heavy industry will be limited. The resulting change will be qualitative rather than quantitative. Production of goods for exchange, i.e., the dominance of exchange value (Marx), will be replaced by production for use, i.e., by utility value; voluntary activity will be substituted for wage labour; anti-utilitarianism will take effect through gift economy (known and used by indigenous peoples and anthropology); in practice, this will be a kind of reciprocity in lieu of profit. New forms of commoning will restrict private property and paid work; communal currencies will operate outside the market economy, money will be public while private banks will not be allowed to issue a currency. The new society will be based on *autonomy*. Marx was right that the first condition of autonomy is exemption from having to work for *wages*. Autonomy means that individuals or rather communities will decide their own community future, without having to submit to economic necessity; they will subsist on some form of collective self-restraint in the exercise of choice. Furthermore, this will imply a break with the political consensus based on the concept of sustainability in terms of green modification of growth. This is an alternative to modernity per se, which challenges industrialism and dominance – the building blocks of the Enlightenment (as demonstrated by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*).

The concept of degrowth often meets with a fundamental misinterpretation not only in the juxtaposition of modernity with ecologism, but also in the dichotomy between austerity, frugality and sobriety on the one hand and squandering and waste on the other. Introduction of the economic category of *dépense* (O. Romano) has brought a significant shift in the elaboration of the concept of degrowth. All civilizations have an issue with disposing of excess energy. This ability evolves into the utilisation of human freedom. The process of individualization of Western societies has deprived communities of the ability to utilise energy; this is accomplished solely by individuals. Modern society is sustained by steady growth. Isolated Individuals are obsessed by the requirement of their survival; they respond to the challenge of excess energy like animals, for which forage for resour-

ces is of paramount importance. In the Degrowth Paradigm, the way of using excess energy or *dépense* is radically shifted towards the collective search for the meaning of life and the restoration of political sovereignty.

Neither austerity (EU), nor deficiency (USA) can contribute to the resolution of crisis. Both Keynesians and monetarists mistakenly believe that as soon as the crisis is over, accumulation will continue unabated, as in the past. And they are also convinced of the rightness of Weber's Protestant Ethic, i.e., of the obligation to work and the prohibition of idleness, which, however, no longer works as the "spirit of capitalism". A statement made by Paul Lafargue in 1883 that society has to produce so many resources that not only a handful of selected, affluent ones, but everyone would have the right to be lazy, serves as an inspiration for degrowth. The wealth of industrial society is based on the reinvestment of surplus value in order to ensure growth. By contrast, degrowth society will be based on social *dépense*, on the endorsement of a variety of individual and collective activities, which are unproductive in a way. The capital is thus pushed outside the sphere of circulation. The decision on such "spending" is a political one; the community will decide what it considers "a good life". Deficiency is not a natural but rather a social parameter. Autonomy means the power to control the resources and to satisfy one's needs, increasing the freedom of choice and creativity. Socialization means that spending (*dépense*) has reverted to the public domain. New institutions will collectively decide on the ways of satisfying essential needs on the one hand and the various forms of spending on a good life on the other. *Sobriety* not for the sake of a financial deficit, or of moral or environmental constraints, but on the grounds that it is impossible to fulfil the meaning of life through private accumulation. The book closes with an avowal that political economy will regain honour and respect (Editors' epilogue).

Vive la décroissance conviviale! Pour la sobriété individuelle et la dépense sociale!

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