

# Convivial Degrowth or Barbarity?

Part of [Degrowth and Progress](#)

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Let's start with a metaphor, inspired by one of our icons, the snail. Of course, we French love the snail. To quote a common saying from the 1973 cult comedy film *L'an 01: On arrête tout, on réfléchit, et c'est pas triste* (We stop, we think, and we are not sad).<sup>1</sup> The snail invites us to slow down. And it also underlines what the growth model forgot or denies, a sense of the limits: *'The snail constructs the delicate architecture of its shell by adding ever increasing spirals one after the other, but then it abruptly stops and winds back in the reverse direction. In fact, just one additional larger spiral would make the shell sixteen times bigger. Instead of being beneficial, it would overload the snail. Any increase in the snail's productivity would only be used to offset the difficulties created by the enlargement of the shell beyond its preordained limits. Once the limit to increasing the spiral size has been reached, the problems of excessive growth multiply exponentially, while the snail's biological capability, in the best of cases, can only show linear growth and increase arithmetically'* (Illich 2005).<sup>2</sup> Degrowth is an invitation to reflect on the 'wisdom of the snail', an invitation to question the physical limits to growth for society – more does not necessary mean better. Sometimes it can even be 'worse', 'destructive', or 'devastating'. The only desirable and sustainable growth is degrowth.

1. Doillon, Jacques, Alain Resnais and Jean Rouch 1973. *L'an 01*, film, France.

2. Illich, Ivan 2005. 'Le Genre vernaculaire', in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2. Fayard, Paris.

## Degrowth – Birth of a Word

Even if based on old ideas and thoughts, cultural or even spiritual traditions, degrowth as a term and as a movement began in France relatively recently, in the early 2000s. Two groups of people met. The first, the Adbusters of Lyon. They organised civil disobedience actions and published newspapers to alert society about marketing manipulation – advertising infantilises, plays with fears and frustrations to make people desire useless stuff. Debate on climate change and biodiversity was also slowly starting to appear at this time. The Adbusters immediately understood that the system would try to co-opt these raising debates; it has since become known as 'sustainable development'. They met with the second group in 2002 at UNESCO in Paris. This group of academics and activists from the global south and the global north had organised a large conference entitled *Défaire le développement, refaire le monde!* (Unmake development, remake the world!). The conference offered a critical understanding of development as the continuity of colonialism: development is nothing but a tool for imperialism, which imposes a

Western model of civilisation on the rest of the world and justifies the exploitation of the planet and that of minorities. Both groups cooperated on a special issue of *Silence*, *La décroissance* – degrowth appeared for the first time as a term for the decolonisation of the growth imaginary: ‘To survive or endure, it is urgent to organise *décroissance*. When you are in Rome and you want to go to Turin, and if you are on the train to Naples by mistake, it is not enough to slow down the train, to brake, or even to stop, you must get off and take another train in the opposite direction. To save the planet and guarantee an acceptable future for our children, it is not enough to moderate current trends, we must directly escape development and economism. Enacting *décroissance* means, in other words, to abandon the economic imaginary, which is the belief that more equals better’ (Latouche 2002).<sup>3</sup> The word ‘*décroissance*’ is not about decline but about ‘dé-croire’ (de-believe). Its negation was chosen on purpose to protect it from co-option by the dominant system. And its provocation deconstructs implicit beliefs around toxic concepts: capitalism, consumerism, development, economism, materialism, patriarchy, productivism, techno-scientism.

3. Latouche, Serge 2002. ‘A bas le développement durable! Vive la décroissance conviviale!’, *Silence*, no. 280, February: pp. 8–11. Unless otherwise stated, my translation.

## Decolonisation of the Dominant Imaginary

Degrowth is about the physical limits to growth: infinite growth on a finite planet is just not possible. But even if it were, we would still need to question whether it makes sense? Work more to produce more to consume more ... like a hamster in its wheel. So is degrowth an invitation to re-evaluate what really matters? If so, what are our basic needs and how shall we fulfil them in a sustainable way?

Degrowth is also an invitation to take a journey back into history: How did Western civilisation end up producing such an environmentally destructive, productivist system that exploits humans too? This re-evaluation requires learning from past civilisations and the global south. Consider: ‘In an attempt to translate “development” into Eton – or Itón, a Bantu language spoken in Cameroon – the closest approximation was “the white man illusion”!’ (Latouche 2004).<sup>4</sup> Such anecdotes invite Western culture to rethink our beliefs and to be more modest.

4. Latouche, Serge 1998. *L'Autre Afrique: Entre Don et Marché*. Albin Michel, Paris.

‘The colonial pillaging of effectively ‘under-Westernised’ countries persisted due to what alter-globalist Aminata Traoré (Mali’s ex-Minister of Culture and Tourism) has called a “rape of their imaginary”. Illuminated in works such as Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano’s *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, the extraction and exploitation of resources from Africa, Asia and Latin America were secured and organised to support incredible economic progress in Europe. This is how the period 1945 to 1975 became known generally as the Golden Age of Capitalism, the Glorious Thirty years in France, the post-Second World War economic boom for most countries of the Global North’ (Liegey and Nelson 2020).<sup>5</sup>

5. Liegey, Vincent and Anitra Nelson 2020. *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide*. Pluto Press, London.

Liberated from such dominant developmentalist but also patriarchal and economic imaginaries, we can start to construct new worlds based on other principles, including conviviality, ecofeminism, autonomy, the commons, libertarian municipalism, self-organisation, care, non-violent communication, and open relocalisation (Liegey et al. 2015).<sup>6</sup>

6. Liegey, Vincent, Stéphane

# The First Principle of Degrowth

As Oxfam International stated in late 2020: 'The richest 1 percent of the world's population are responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the 3.1 billion people who made up the poorest half of humanity during a critical twenty-five-year period of unprecedented emissions growth'.<sup>7</sup> There is no space for self-determination in the global south without a radical reduction of the environmental footprint of the world's richest, which would mean a decrease in resource and labour exploitation. Growth has always been used to justify raising inequalities – 'we produce more so you too will be able to enjoy the way of life of the richest'. But there is no growth anymore and such conspicuous consumption is no longer desirable.

Green growth, based on the belief of decoupling from consumption, is a fake: scientific evidence shows that there is no economic growth possible with the reduction of energy usage, nor is there any environmental impact (European Environmental Bureau 2019).<sup>8</sup> Rather 'frugal abundance' is the only coherent solution to ensure basic needs are securely met for all. Degrowth can only ever be frugal: it reverses the overconsumption and poverty of capitalist growth economies. Hence, degrowth proposes an unconditional autonomy allowance. Such an allowance would be given to all, from birth to death, unconditionally. It is like the universal basic income, but it is also partially de-commodified. It consists of a mix of unconditional services (free access to basic needs) and income (ideally in local currencies, or via reciprocity) to secure accommodation, food and water, energy, clothes, basic tools, education, health, culture and information, coupled with a maximum income. This would mean that the first principle of degrowth is the reduction in inequality.

## Open Relocalisation towards Pluriversalism

Degrowth is an invitation to re-localise our economies, production and exchange. It makes sense from an energy and environmental point of view to get rid of this craziness of always using more transportation. The Covid-19 pandemic has also alerted us to the potential breakdown of supply chains when placed under pressure. But it is even more important from a cultural and symbolic perspective. It is about appropriating the tools for conviviality to slow down our production (Illich 1973)<sup>9</sup>. Small is beautiful (Schumacher 1973)<sup>10</sup> – make it local, as craft, with organic, low tech. It is also about getting out of the everyday banality of evil (Arendt 1963/2006).<sup>11</sup> If you produce locally, you would become more aware of the environmental impact and human exploitation behind the stuff you buy? Would you still buy a new smartphone every year if you had the cobalt mine in your garden, for example? And if you met the children working in such mines every day? Open relocalisation is about becoming conscious of our choices and understanding their direct impact. It is about responsibility and citizenship. It is an invitation to question our basic needs. It is about the commons and a new democratic system based on questioning what we produce – How? And for what use?

Madelaine, Christophe Ondet and Anisabel Veillot 2015. 'Ni protectionnisme, ni néolibéralisme mais une "relocalisation ouverte", base d'une nouvelle internationale', *Basta!*, November.

7. Oxfam International 2020. Press release, 21 September.

8. European Environmental Bureau 2019. 'Decoupling Debunked', report, 8 July.

9. Illich, Ivan 1973. *Tools for Conviviality*. Harper & Row, New York.

10. Schumacher, E.F 1973. *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered*. Abacus, London.

11. Arendt, Hannah 1963/2006. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin Books, London.

However, relocalisation does not mean protectionism, nor the closing of borders. On the contrary, we speak about relocalisation with openness, solidarity, and cultural and linguistic exchange. In such a globalised economy, which only faces more and more environmental catastrophes, we need solidarity. Everywhere around the world local initiatives are emerging to produce, exchange and care for one another. All of these good practices can be shared through open source, from permaculture to low tech. The enjoyment of life is about cultural exchange after all. Degrowth through open relocalisation and pluriversalism is about saving, respecting, caring and recreating diversity in a globalised world that seeks a way to secure universal rights and overcome Western colonialism (Kothari et al. 2019).<sup>12</sup>

## Shock Doctrine or Pedagogy of Catastrophes?

Our Western civilisation is reaching its energetic but also cultural limits. A major collapse due to the acceleration of climate change and biodiversity loss is already happening; inequalities are exploding, democratic institutions are shrinking, an oligarchy took control of our imaginations through the media, advertising and the algorithms behind social networks. The 'shock doctrine' with its ever-increasing authoritarianism is flourishing (Klein 2007).<sup>13</sup> We have a lot of good reasons to be depressed.

Yet, a cultural change against this system and towards degrowth principles does not seem impossible. The polls are showing more and more rejection of capitalism and green growth. Surveys are underlining behavioural change towards consumption. And local initiatives around the world are inventing and implementing alternative ways of life based on conviviality, care and sustainability.

Are we ready for a 'pedagogy of catastrophes' (Dupuy 2004)?<sup>14</sup> Do we see catastrophe as an opportunity for change? The shock doctrine of the last decades has served a neoliberal political agenda. Could the current world shock of the pandemic produce other dynamics? Convivial degrowth or forced and barbarian recession, that is the question. Degrowth invites us to consider what really matters – decolonise our growth imaginary, liberate creativity, ensure solidarity.

**12. Kothari, Ashish, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta 2019. *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*. Tulika Books, New Delhi.**

**13. Klein, Naomi 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Knopf Canada, Toronto.**

**14. Dupuy, Jean-Pierre 2004. *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé: Quand l'impossible est certain*. Éditions du Seuil, Paris.**

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