



# Escaping from the economy: the politics of degrowth

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## Abstract

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**Purpose** – Whilst there is a growing recognition of environmental degradation, the policies of sustainable development or ecological modernisation offered by national governments and international institutions seem to do little more than “sustain the unsustainable”. By promising to reconcile growth with the environment, they fail to question the economic principle of endless growth that has caused environmental destruction in the first place. In this context, alternatives based on critiques of growth may offer more promising grounds. The aim of this paper is to explore how the degrowth movement that emerged in France over the last decade resonates with, and can contribute to, green politics.

**Design/methodology/approach** – After locating the movement within environmental politics and providing a brief account of its development, the paper focuses on its core theme – escaping from the economy.

**Findings** – Here it is argued that the movement’s main emphasis is not merely on calling for less growth, consumption or production, but more fundamentally, in inviting one to shift and re-politicise the terms in which economic relations and identities are considered. This politicisation of the economy is discussed in terms of the movement’s foregrounding of democracy and citizenship, and it is argued that the articulation of these two concepts may offer interesting points of departure for conceptualising and practising alternatives to consumer capitalism.

**Originality/value** – The final part of the paper explores how the degrowth movement’s stance on democracy and citizenship could help address two problematic issues within environmental politics: that of inclusion, and motivation

**Keywords** Citizenship, National economy, Public policy, Sustainable development

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

At a time when it has finally become widely accepted that climate change was caused by man-made emission of CO<sub>2</sub>, the exploration of alternative economic models to consumer capitalism seems a more than ever pressing issue (Wall, 2007). Within this context, the degrowth movement that emerged in France over the last decade may have some interesting contribution to make. Yet whilst the movement has made its way into other European countries, especially Italy and Belgium, its ideas have hardly made an appearance in Anglo-Saxon academic or public debates; indeed, at the time of writing this paper I found only three English-language articles on degrowth (Baykan, 2007; Fotopoulos, 2007; Latouche, 2007) beside a few articles by Latouche published in the English version of *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Latouche, 2004b, 2006b). No doubt, the ideas that circulate within the degrowth movement in France resonate with critiques of growth made elsewhere in green politics or development politics (see for example, Curtis, 2003; de Rivero, 2001; Douthwaite, 1992; Escobar, 1995; Meadows *et al.*, 1972; Scott-Cato, 2006; Seabrook, 1993; Trainer, 2002, to mention only a few examples). However, the degrowth movement may have something to add to these critiques; in particular, it will be argued in this paper that the movement’s over-arching theme – escaping from the economy – provides interesting points of departure for



conceptualising and practising alternatives to Western style consumer capitalism, notably in its foregrounding and articulation of democracy and citizenship. The degrowth movement's critique of growth is inscribed within a conceptual framework that challenges orthodox economic thinking or "economism" for "colonising our imagination" (Latouche, 2005a). From this perspective, the main culprit is not growth itself but the ideology of growth, a system of representation that translates everything into a reified and autonomous economic reality inhabited by self-interested consumers. It follows that to challenge the "tyranny of growth", it is not sufficient to call for lesser, slower or greener growth for this would leave us trapped within the same economic logic; rather we need to escape from the economy as a system of representation. This means re-imagining economic relations, identities, activities in different terms; and it is to this end that the degrowth movement puts forward the notions of democracy and citizenship.

Before exploring further how the degrowth movement proposes to escape from the economy, the paper will first situate the movement within the broader context of environmental politics. The second part of the paper will then offer a brief introduction to the development of degrowth in France. The third part of the paper will return to the movement's core theme of "getting out of the economy" and discuss its articulation in terms of democracy and citizenship. Finally, the paper will explore how the degrowth movement's stance on democracy and citizenship can contribute to two problematic notions within environmental politics: inclusion and motivation.

### **Locating degrowth within environmental debates**

As Gibbs (2007) observed, we are all environmentalists now as it has become difficult to escape knowledge of climate change or oil reserve depletion, and their potential impact on our lives. The social and environmental problems raised by economic growth have become front page news, and the accumulation of facts pointing to the unsustainability of current patterns of growth probably does not need rehearsing here, it may be sufficient to point to some of the most telling statistics:

- it would take five to six planets for the entire world population to consume and pollute to the standards of US citizens (and around three planets for European standards) (e.g. Walter and Simms, 2006).
- Ecological footprint analyses show that people in the North are living far beyond their ecological means. Whilst the average biologically productive area available to each world citizen (assuming equal distribution) in 2003 was 1.8 hectares, the footprint of US citizens was 9.6 hectares, that of EU citizens was 4.8 hectares and that of low-income countries 0.8 hectares (Global Footprint Network, 2006)[1].

In spite of the urgency of these problems, politicians, at local, national and international levels have been busy designing policies aimed at, for example, curbing carbon emission; and business has also joined on the environmental bandwagon, as a growing number of organisations develop "green" policies (e.g. Banerjee, 2001; Fineman, 2001). For example, in spring 2007, several retail chains, including Tesco, Marks & Spencer and Wal-Marts, all announced their commitment towards becoming carbon neutral.

In widening its audience, environmentalism has become articulated in terms of programmes of reforms that have come under various re-assuring labels such

sustainable development or ecological modernisation (Baker, 2006; Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007; Gibbs, 2007). These programmes of reforms tend to offer an optimistic view based on the use of eco-efficient technologies to resolve environmental problems and are usually cast in terms of their “reasonable” and “workable” solutions; thus the discourse of environmental modernisation embraced by many corporations tends to stress its pragmatism and practical relevance over and above the naiveté or extremism of more radical views (Prasad and Elmes, 2005). Central to these programmes and their “pragmatism” is the belief in the compatibility between consumer capitalism and ecological sustainability; indeed, this belief has become a hegemonic and convenient motif (Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007), fuelled by faith in “eco-technology” and market mechanisms. Thus, whilst environmental concerns have moved centre stage of government and sometimes corporate agenda, the founding principles of Western patterns of consumption and production remain non-negotiable. Ecological sustainability, as framed by national governments or international institutions (e.g. Agenda 21, the Kyoto protocol, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), remains firmly subordinated to economic growth. Whilst there are different approaches to ecological modernisation or sustainable development (e.g. Barry, 2005; Christoff, 1996), the central motif is to reconcile the tensions between technology and ecology, economic growth and ecology, and competitive market and ecology (Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007). In this convenient rendering, economic growth and environmental protection are intimately linked through win-win strategies, suggesting we can have everything we want without facing any risk (Milne *et al.*, 2006).

However, this political smoothing of sustainability[2] has been the object of severe criticisms (e.g. Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007; de Geus, 2003; Harvey, 1996; York *et al.*, 2003). In becoming mainstream, sustainability has been washed out of its more radical questioning of economic models, and especially economic growth; and for many since the publication of the *Limits to Growth* report in 1972 (Meadows *et al.*, 1972), if there is to be any hope of a sustainable future, it is precisely economic growth that needs to be called into question (e.g. Carruthers, 2001; Milne *et al.*, 2006; Trainer, 2002; Scott-Cato, 2006). As Prasad and Elmes (2005) note, policies of sustainable development, corporate environmentalism or ecological modernisation are only “practical” to the extent that they involve minimum disruption and inconvenience for corporations and consumers in the North, but certainly not in their ability to provide for a more sustainable futures. Indeed, it could be argued that what is managed under policy of sustainable development is not the path towards a more sustainable future, but rather the inability and unwillingness to become sustainable (Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007). Thus in the face of mounting ecological disasters worldwide, from droughts to floods, desertification to species extinction, the continued insistence on the efficacy of technological and market solutions and the concomitant denial that the capitalist principle of infinite growth is unsustainable can only be qualified as pathological (Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007). Discourse and policies of sustainable development and ecological modernisation only serve to “sustain the unsustainable” (Blühdorn, 2007); they not only absolve major corporations and a capitalist economy of endless growth of environmental responsibilities, but also cast them as the new heroes of sustainability: BP (British Petroleum) will take us “Beyond Petroleum”, and growth towards a sustainable future.

The movement for degrowth is firmly grounded in this critique of growth-orientated “solutions” to environmental degradation, as will become evident in the following discussion.

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### An introduction to the degrowth movement

The idea of degrowth, or *décroissance*, and the debates it has generated are inscribed within a critical tradition that has challenged neo-liberal understanding of economic development and growth for some time; thus the movement identifies Gandhi, Gorz (1975), Arendt (1958), Illich (1973) and Schumacher (1973) (to mention only a few) as its precursors. The term *décroissance* first appeared in the French translation of Georgescu-Roegen's (1971) seminal work *The Entropy Law and the economic process*[3]. It has since been popularised by various writers, mostly academics and journalists such as Latouche, Ariès, Cheney and Schneider, to mention a few of its most prominent advocates, in the pages of the *Monde Diplomatique* (e.g. Latouche, 2004b, 2006b) and various other publications (e.g. Ariès, 2005, 2006; Cheynet *et al.*, 2003; Latouche, 2001, 2004a, 2005a, b, 2006a). Its ideas have been circulated and debated in various forums, for example in a monthly magazine entitled *La Décroissance*, through a research centre – the Institut d'Etudes Economiques et Sociales pour la Décroissance Soutenable, a political party – le Parti pour la Décroissance, as well more informal local or internet-based groups.

Georgescu-Roegen (1971) introduced the notion of degrowth in response to what he regarded as the irreversible damage inflicted by the politics of endless growth preached by neo-liberal economics. He argued that classical economics was based on a mechanistic vision that ignores the principle of entropy, the second principle of thermodynamics. According to the entropy law, whilst it may be the case that energy is conserved (“nothing gets lost, everything is transformed”), it is nevertheless degraded or transformed by its use, and therefore cannot be returned to its original state and used again in the same way. For example, the energy that goes into the making of a computer can never be returned to its original state and be used to make another computer. Thus endless growth, supported by an ever growing use of natural resources, will lead to the exhaustion and despoiling of the earth capacity and is a physical aberration. For Georgescu-Roegen, classical economics by ignoring the entropy law is both not materialistic enough in that does not take the physical reality of natural resources into account, and too materialistic in that it reduces human beings to their economic function as producer and consumer, a key argument of the movement for degrowth to which I shall return in the next section.

Drawing on the work of Georgescu-Roegen, proponents of degrowth denounce economic thinking and systems that see growth as the ultimate good. They offer degrowth as a symbolic weapon or “missile concept” (*mot obus*) (Ariès, 2005) against the “tyranny of growth”, and to provoke thought about alternatives. Besides pointing out that growth and ever-increasing consumption are unsustainable socially and ecologically, they also question measures of growth such as the Gross National Product (e.g. Ariès, 2005; Clémentin, 2005). Such measures only take into account the production and sale of commodified goods and services, ignoring the damaging effects these have on other “goods”: justice, equality, democracy, human and ecosystems' health, quality of life, social relations. They point to the absurdity of an economic system based on “growth” when what is meant to “grow” remains arbitrary. Thus, increasing cancers, road accidents, obesity, ecological disasters, wars all contribute to economic growth through the consumption of insurance, medical products and services, cleaning industry, weapons and so on, a point made by many in green politics (e.g. Scott-Cato, 2006).

And the degrowth movement is equally vitriolic of any attempt to reconcile growth and environmental concerns; for example, the concept of sustainable development is

seen as an “oxymoron” (Latouche, 2004b), for growth, be it sustainable, green or however qualified, cannot be sustainable. At the core of this argument is a critique of the reliance on eco-technologies to fuel “greener” growth. The main point made here relates to what has become known as the “rebound effect” (Binswanger, 2003; Schneider, 2002, 2003): any gain in energy derived from the use of more efficient technology is usually cancelled out by an increase in consumption. Eco-efficient technologies only make us consume more, a finding confirmed by others (e.g. Princen, 2003; Herring, 2002); for example, fuel efficient cars enable us to travel more; the use of solar energy enables us to heat our house or water more, and so on. The problem is not with these eco-efficient technologies themselves, potentially they can be useful, but with their inscription within a paradigm of growth; their deployment towards increased consumption and production.

It is within this context of mounting ecological (and social) wreckage, of the absurd and arbitrary definition of growth, and the pursuit of growth (be it “sustainable”) at all cost, that degrowth is offered first and foremost as a conceptual or ideological weapon. Proponents of degrowth seek to challenge the “naturalness”, the supposed inevitability and desirability of growth; they oppose the ideology of growth (more than growth in itself which is no more than an arbitrary calculation), and offer degrowth as a “missile word” (Ariès, 2005), a political weapon to decolonise the collective imagination and free it from the tyranny of growth (Latouche, 2005a). Thus degrowth is not presented as a programme, an ideology or another economic theory (Latouche, 2006b), but as a symbolic challenge to policies that herald growth as an end in itself; degrowth is not to be turned into a blueprint or an end in itself, but to remain a means for fostering a spirit of critique (Ariès, 2005), for questioning the priority accorded to economic values and principles[4]. According to Ariès (2005), this critical intent is well served by the term “degrowth”. Although the term may have a negative connotation, it presents the advantage of not being easily recuperated by capitalism and the logic of ever more upon which it is based. Indeed, as Monbiot (2007) aptly put it in a critical commentary on supermarkets’ chains attempts to cut down carbon emission, supermarkets may try to sell us “green” or “ethical”, but one thing that supermarkets or capitalism more generally cannot sell us is “less”.

But degrowth is not just a quantitative question of doing less of the same, it is also and, more fundamentally, about a paradigmatic re-ordering of values, in particular the (re)affirmation of social and ecological values and a (re)politicisation of the economy. It aims to take us out of the economy, of the domain of the calculable and economic rationality, and ask fundamental questions about the nature of wealth, its distribution, its use, and misuse. Thus degrowth is not just a quantitative question of producing and consuming less, but a tool proposed for initiating a more radical break with dominant economic thinking. This radical break is signalled firstly by foregrounding democratic choices and debates in the shaping of the economy, and secondly by re-imagining economic relations and identities in different terms; both moves can be captured under a core concern of the degrowth movement: escaping from the economy (*sortir de l'économie*). This theme will be explored in the following section, but first it may worth outlining briefly the various ways in which the degrowth movement has manifested itself in French politics.

The degrowth movement is a rather loose and open network including a variety of forums for circulating, sharing and debating ideas and experiences. These exchanges take place through various medias and platforms, for example, the monthly periodical *Décroissance: Le Journal de la Joie de Vivre*; various local or national internet-based

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forums (see for example, [decroissance.info](http://decroissance.info), an open platform for debating different perspectives on “degrowth” both theoretically and at a more practical level, at [www.Decroissance.info](http://www.Decroissance.info)); a research and resource centre on degrowth (Institut d’Etudes Economiques et Sociales pour la Décroissance Soutenable, [www.Decroissance.org](http://www.Decroissance.org)). In addition, the degrowth movement organises various events to take its ideas to the public; the two most prominent events are the “buy nothing day” in November of each year, and the organisation of the Marche pour la Décroissance (Walk for Degrowth). The first walk was organised in the summer 2005, with participants joining for anything from a day to the 4-week long trek. The walk was heralded as a success not only in bringing the idea of degrowth to visibility, but also in fostering experiments in degrowth itself, with participants sharing low impact living for a month. Similar walks took place in summer 2006 and 2007. At a more formal level, the degrowth movement led to the formation of a political party in April 2006, Parti pour la Décroissance ([www.partipourlaDecroissance.net](http://www.partipourlaDecroissance.net)).

To conclude this brief overview of the development of the degrowth movement, there are three points worth of note. The first one is the firm grounding of the movement within academia; many of its spokespersons (e.g. Ariès, Latouche, Cheynet, Schneider) are university academics who have developed links with various European research institutes including ESEE (European Society for Ecological Economics, [www.euroecolecon.org](http://www.euroecolecon.org)), SERI (Sustainable Europe Research Institute, [www.seri.at](http://www.seri.at)) and R&D (Research and Degrowth/Recherche et Décroissance, [www.degrowth.net](http://www.degrowth.net)). Together, these various institutes are organising an international conference on degrowth (“Economic Degrowth for Sustainability and Equity”) to be held in April 2008. Secondly, the growing international dimension of the movement is also reflected at a more popular level with the emergence of a degrowth network in Italy (Decrescita, [www.decrescita.it](http://www.decrescita.it)), and a European wide network of Growth Objectors for Post Development/Reseau d’Objecteurs de Croissance pour l’Après-Developpement (ROCADE, [www.apres-developpement.org](http://www.apres-developpement.org)). Finally, the development of the degrowth movement in France is interesting in that it has acquired a level of visibility and organisation that it may not have reached elsewhere. Indeed, it is a term with which most candidates in the French presidential election of 2007, as well as the mainstream press, had to engage with, be it to misrepresent and undermine it (Latouche, 2007).

### **Putting the economy in its place**

Putting the economy back in its place, or “escaping from the economy” (*sortir de l’économie*) (Homs, 2006; Latouche, 2005a, b) has become a central motif of the degrowth movement, and is particularly apt in capturing some of its central themes, especially the emphasis on democratic choice, and the foregrounding of social and humanistic values over economic rationality. Putting the economy back in its place involves the affirmation of values grounded in humanism and the republican ideals of democracy, equality and solidarity (Ariès, 2007; Cheynet, 2007).

For proponents of degrowth, in order to challenge neo-liberal economics of growth, it is not enough to propose alternative economic models because the proposal of alternative economies does not in itself question the importance accorded to the economy; instead, we need to start with value and politics, we need to oppose economic determinism or “economism” by going back to the terrain of the political. Thus one of the starting point of the degrowth movement is to politicise the economy, to reveal it as an abstract idea, a self-referential system of representations (Latouche, 2005b; Homs, 2006) rather than an objective reality, a set of “given” facts and forces as it is commonly

presented. Of course, on this point, degrowth advocates draw upon a whole tradition that since Polanyi (1944) has sought to deconstruct the naturalness of the economy (see for example, Caillé, 2005; Callon, 1998; Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006) and has called into question the “hardness”, “fact-ness” or supposed inevitability of economic “realities” such as the market, work or value. From this perspective, the economy is seen as a historical process created through discursive practices rather than as a natural, autonomous and a-historical phenomenon. For example, Gibson-Graham (1996, 2002, 2006) have called for a reconceptualisation of economic relations and identities away from “capitalocentric” thinking. Throughout their extensive work, Gibson-Graham (e.g. 1996, 2002, 2006; the Communities Economies Collective, 2001) has sought to reframe economic activities in terms of the co-existence of different forms of transactions, labour, and ways of producing and distributing surplus. In their involvement in various community regeneration programmes, Gibson-Graham and their colleagues in the Community Economies Collective have invited people to re-imagine their economic activities in terms other than those made available by capitalism. For example, they have sought to re-present different forms of transactions beside commodity market (e.g. local trading schemes, gifts, mutual exchange between households), different forms of labour beside wage labour (e.g. self-employment, volunteering, domestic work) and different forms of surplus distribution beside capital accumulation and profit “imperative” (e.g. governed by social or environmental ethic). This broadening of the “economy” has opened up possibilities for people to re-imagine their “economic activities” in terms of the voluntary contributions, mutual help and provision of “free services”, in which they routinely engage in the home, the neighbourhood or the broader community.

The degrowth movement shares much of Gibson-Graham’s critical intent, and also insists that the economy is open to choices and multiple possibilities; both approaches contribute to freeing the imagination and conceptualisation of material practices from the grip of capitalism. However, if they both share a concern to politicise the economy, they approach this task from different perspectives. Firstly, whilst Gibson-Graham is concerned to free the economy from capitalist rendering, and to map out economic relations in terms other than those made available under capitalism, the degrowth movement starts with concepts or values within politics (democracy, citizenship) to recast economic activities in political terms. Secondly, the degrowth movement inscribes its reconceptualisation of the economy within environmental concerns, and thus could forge links between environmental-led and economic-led calls to rethink the economy.

Insisting on the constructed nature of the “economy” is not to deny the importance of the various material practices that go into meeting our needs. However for proponents of the degrowth movement (as well as for the many authors mentioned above who stress the constructed and political nature of the economy), these practices need to be re-embedded within the social and the political rather than be seen as belonging to an autonomous, reified field of “the economy”.

This escape from the economy is at least as much a question of decolonising the imagination as one of enacting new practices, it calls for rethinking the economy (or as Caillé, 2005, puts it “de-thinking the economic”), or rethinking ourselves outside economic relations, for example, by fighting against the reduction of human beings to their economic function, as producers and consumers (Ariès, 2005). This re-thinking outside the economy is illustrated here with two conceptual moves within degrowth debates, each corresponding to the affirmation of a different set of values to that of

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“economic rationality”: replacing the discourse of economic imperatives by that of choice and democracy, and recasting the consumer as a citizen.

*From economic imperative to democratic choice*

A concept central to degrowth is that of democracy, and with it, the affirmation of choice in the face of the supposed inevitability or autonomy of the growth economy. Degrowth foregrounds choice by firmly placing what are usually presented as inevitable economic rules or forces within a democratic framework, and questioning “immutable” economic precepts such as the commonly deployed notion that growth (and efficiency) will help protect and create jobs; and surely no one could stand against this! For politicians and managers, the protection and creation of jobs has long been a magic trick (or as degrowth proponents would maybe more aptly call it, a blackmailing strategy) deployed to call for and legitimise efficiency measures designed to increase competitiveness or programmes of growth, as if “jobs” were in themselves an irrefutably desirable end; and indeed one of the main arguments that has been made against the degrowth movement is that it would lead to the loss of jobs. However, proponents of degrowth question the social utility of creating or protecting meaningless or even harmful jobs, for example they ask: what sort of jobs? Under what conditions? To produce what? For whom? With what consequences? For what social utility? These questions have led to debates within the degrowth movement that not only provide a critique of the value placed on (waged) work, but also call for self-reduction in working time by unilaterally taking unpaid leave (e.g. Homs, 2007).

But if the degrowth movement is intent on getting us out of economic imperatives, they are equally suspicious of political or ecological imperatives. Thus, they are wary of the possible danger of emerging authoritarian responses to environmental crisis. There is a long-lived tension within environmentalism between a commitment to democracy and grassroots participation on the one hand, and a concern for immediate action and results in the light of rapid ecological degradation on the other (Latta, 2007; Torgerson, 1999). Indeed, the sense of an environmental crisis could become another means (besides invoking the threat of terrorism) of reinforcing state authority (Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007).

The degrowth movement recognises the danger of “ends-oriented” thinking where the perception of a crisis produces a “political imperative” that pushes aside democratic debate and urges us all to act in a concerted manner. As Latouche (2006b) notes, faced with serious environmental threats, people who have the most to lose (mainly in the North) might well hand over their freedom to state figures promising to preserve their lifestyles. This would of course entail a drastic aggravation of global injustice, and be a serious blow to democracy. Degrowth is offered as a way of avoiding “ecocracy” in the future, a path we could chose today to remain in a position to collectively and democratically shape our future in the face of ecological degradation. The more we wait, the more the shock imposed by the earth natural limits might be brutal and the risk of emerging “ecototalitarian” responses high. But whilst recognising the threat of environmental degradation, proponents of degrowth are not prepared to sacrifice democracy to some “ecological imperative” any more than to economic or political imperatives.

Unlike some radical ecologists and in particular deep ecologists (e.g. Næss, 1989; Sessions, 1995), degrowth proponents are as keen to escape from the “force” of nature as they are from the force of capitalism or the market. Degrowth is not presented as an ecological imperative (although it may be that too), but as an opportunity to initiate

debates and reclaim decisions about the organisation of economic and social activities. Thus Ariès (2005) insists that degrowth is not a “forced option” in the face of catastrophic environmental crisis; he is keen to move away from apocalyptic visions that could legitimise imposed solutions, and insists that degrowth is a choice that defenders would make without the oncoming ecological crisis, “simply to be human”. Degrowth is not defended as a necessity but as a choice, one that has to be made democratically and openly. Similarly, for Latouche (2006b), whilst degrowth may impose itself through natural limits, it is an opportunity to democratically reclaim and rethink the way we live, or “to make a virtue out of necessity”. The material conditions defined by limited ecological space and its current over-use may create an imperative for radical change in the ways we organise ourselves, but it does not in itself dictate how this should be done.

This emphasis on democratic choice over “imperative” is accompanied by a privileging of human and social values above ecological ones. Whilst degrowth may have to operate within ecological limits, it is strongly anchored in humanist values; and various proponents are at pains to show that their concerns are primarily with human values and social justice rather than ecological values. Thus as noted above, Ariès (2005) would stand for degrowth even without the oncoming ecological crisis, “simply to be human”; in a similar vein, the Parti pour la Décroissance defines itself as “humanist” before ecologist. Similarly, for Latouche (2006a), degrowth is not just about protecting the environment, it is a question of social justice. More generally, it is argued that the ecological crisis is just one consequence of an ideology of growth that destroys the social fabric (by creating inequalities and poverty) and democracy as well as the environment. In sum, degrowth is not defended as a necessity but as a political choice: we are not condemned to degrowth, rather it is an open path we can choose and shape.

Thus degrowth is not envisaged in terms of sacrifice, or austerity and scarcity (as it is often accused of), but as an opportunity to reconsider what constitutes the good life. This emphasis on the good life is signalled by the use of terms such as conviviality (*Moins de biens, plus de liens* – “Fewer goods, more relationships” being one of the motto of the movement) and well-being (indeed, the sub-title of the *Journal de La Décroissance* is *La Joie de Vivre*). Proponents insist that degrowth does not require a decrease in quality of life, simply a different conception of quality of life, one that gives more importance to sensorial experiences, relationships, conviviality, silence, beauty than to consumption (Ariès, 2005).

#### *Replacing the consumer by the citizen*

Reclaiming citizenship and privileging this role over economic ones such as that of the consumer has been a strong motif in recent green politics (e.g. Dobson, 2003, 2006; Dobson and Bell, 2006; Dobson and Valencia-Saiz, 2005; Doherty and de Geus, 1996; Hayward, 2006; Latta, 2007)[5]. Dobson’s (2003) conceptualisation of ecological citizenship is of particular interest here since its political rather than moral emphasis seems well in tune with the degrowth movement. Dobson’s (2003) definition of ecological citizenship is grounded in ecological footprints; ecological citizenship is bound by the obligations arising from limited ecological space and excessive ecological footprint; it is grounded in material relations but translate these material relations into political ones. Thus, the current vast inequalities in ecological footprints between rich and poor countries define relations of obligation, especially from the rich to bring about a more equitable distribution of ecological space (Dobson, 2003). For Dobson, grounding ecological citizenship in material relations related to limited ecological

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space makes it an eminently political concept for it sets the conditions of (in)justice: “Political obligation between citizens is generated, in my conception, by the requirements of justice under conditions of ecological space scarcity” (Dobson, 2006, p. 448). Thus ecological citizenship, on this understanding, is not a moral issue, but as Dobson (2003, 2006) is at pains to show, a political one. The community created by the material relations defined by ecological footprint is a political community, rather than one defined by a “common humanity”.

This emphasis on the political nature of citizenship is one shared by the degrowth movement. Here citizenship is also envisaged in terms of collective, political practice; indeed, it is the collective and political nature of citizenship that opens up escape route from the economy. Calling upon citizens takes us away from the individual, self-interested motives of the consumer; it serves to link individual choices and behaviours into collective action, to frame them in a political context, not only “by opening up the possibility of checking self-interest against the common good” (Dobson and Valencia Saiz, 2005, p. 158), but also by lifting what could amount to no more than isolated individual lifestyle decisions and actions (e.g. to recycle, buy green products) into a wider political domain. This politicising function of citizenship is particularly central of the degrowth movement’s proposal for a general consumption strike.

One particular strategy that is put forward as a political weapon for people to reclaim themselves as citizens is the consumption strike (Ariès, 2006). But this consumption strike is not envisaged as the isolated acts of individuals, as an exercise in lifestyle whereby individuals boycott a particular product or opt for voluntary simplicity (although these are also deemed to be worthwhile strategies). Rather, it is proposed as a political act that would be accompanied by collective demands to government and industries (Ariès, 2006). Citizens could, for example, demand institutional or legal frameworks that privilege human rights (such as a universal right to decent accommodation, to free public transport) above the rights of consumers to choose cheap throw-away products, or of producers to advertise. So the idea of the consumption strike is not about exercising power as a consumer (i.e. a sort of “voting with your trolley or wallet”), but rather about refusing to identify oneself as a consumer.

This consumer strike could be organised in steps so that the future “ex-consumers” learn to use this weapon and to live without consumption; the steps that are suggested include for example, participating in the “buy nothing day” that already takes place in November of each year and organising others, targeting forms of consumption that are deemed particularly damaging (e.g. cheap “throw-away” goods manufactured under conditions of slave labour), or inviting people to reflect on how they could consume less (Ariès, 2006). And as we learn to live outside the economy, or the domain of commodity exchange, the consumption strike could also become an end in itself. Unlike the worker’s strike whose aim is to return to work, the aim of the consumer strike is not to return to consumption, but rather to learn to move away from it. Thus the general consumption strike could be both a means and an end: a weapon to attack capitalism and growth economics at its core – in its sacralisation of consumption, but at the same time a way of learning to live differently from the homo economicus which we are commonly reduced to.

If the general consumption strike is one mechanism imagined to privilege the citizen over the consumer, another conceptual strategy that has been put forward is to re-imagine the market as a space that calls upon us as citizen, that appeals to our sense of civil obligation and participation rather than to our “economic rationality”. Thus, Latouche (2003) proposes to reframe the market in terms of the Agora. Drawing on

studies of markets in Africa as well as on the imagery of the Agora in Ancient Greece, he suggests that recasting the market as the Agora would re-inscribe exchange within the social and the political, and would call upon us as citizens rather than consumers. “Markets” would no longer be thought of as just places for commodity exchange, but also as having social and political functions. This is not to say that the market so conceived would have no economic function, but that it would not be reduced to this. For Latouche, the Agora is first and foremost a place of public life and civil society. It is a place for encountering the foreign, the other (a school of tolerance); it is also a forum for political life where elected officials and candidates come out to speak, to campaign and debate. And the Agora is also a place of counter power to the official power (of the Acropolis); for example, in Africa it is a place where women can subvert their subordinate role and affirm themselves as citizens.

In terms of practice, rethinking the market along the line of the Agora means re-inscribing it within time and space, embedding it within local contexts so that it has a more immediate reality to participants. So the market is no longer an abstract, distant, universal, omnipresent and omnipotent “force”, but a specific social reality firmly located in time and space. Indeed, the localisation of exchange, production, finance and politics is seen as “the most important strategic means” of degrowth (Latouche, 2006a). For proponents of degrowth, this means producing locally most of the products that are to satisfy local population’s needs, local financing of organisations through the harnessing of local credit, local exchange schemes, including those relying on local money, and at the political level, the creation of “small republics” whereby all citizens are involved in the public affairs of their area.

In sum, the notions of democracy and citizenship are strong motifs of the degrowth movement, and are both part of its broader intent to “escape from the economy”, to redefine economic relations and identities in political terms. The emphasis on democracy clearly refutes any economic or ecological imperative and firmly places the decisions concerning the organisations of our affairs within our own collective hands, and the foregrounding of the figure of the citizen over that of the consumer paves the way for forms of collective engagement that take us away from the self-interested actions of the homo economicus. However, this dual emphasis on democracy and citizenship is not without potential tensions, tensions that are also reflected within the broader context of environmental politics and that are discussed in the next section.

### **Who wants to be a citizen?**

Any talk of democracy or citizenship begs questions about inclusion and exclusion: who will be willing/able to take part in civil society? Will it be, as environmental politics are often represented, the preserve of a small minority? (e.g. Latta, 2007; Schosberg, 1999) Or can it be made to involve, and appeal to, a broader audience? As noted earlier, there is a potential tension between environmentalism and democracy (Torgerson, 1999; Latta, 2007). On this issue, the degrowth movement is clear that it would stand for democracy before ecology, and as I discussed earlier is wary of “ecological imperative” discourse. By foregrounding choice and democracy in its attempt to politicise the economy, it is careful not to fall into another form of determinism, ecological or otherwise, and is insistent that whilst the material conditions defined by limited ecological space and its unfair distribution create an imperative for radical change, they do not in themselves dictate the ways in which this should be done; indeed, this ecological crisis could be seen as an opportunity to shape our future. In addition, the foregrounding of citizenship in the degrowth movement as

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well as in some recent work within environmentalism (e.g. Dobson, 2003, 2006; Doherty and de Geus, 1996) calls upon us all to participate in environmental actions. Environmental degradation is not a problem to be solved exclusively by government policy but through the everyday decisions and actions of all of us (e.g. Berglund and Matti, 2006). If, following Dobson (2003), we define citizenship in terms of material relations grounded in ecological scarcity, then we are all drawn in as citizens, called to act and participate in the fair distribution of limited natural resources; we are all in relations of obligations, in a position of owing or being owed ecological space (Dobson, 2006).

However this potentially all inclusive definition of (ecological) citizenship leaves two questions open. The first one concerns the mechanisms through which we are called upon as citizens (how do we get the call?), the second concerns our willingness to answer that call, in other words why should we want to be a citizen?

Turning to the first point, the degrowth movement may have some interesting contributions to make. It has proposed or organised the creation of various spaces of civil society, of citizenship, from one day event such as the “Buy Nothing Day”, to the more ambitious general consumption strike, to month long events such as the *Marches pour la Décroissance*, or attempts to re-embed markets within local fabric and politics. However, if degrowth proponents are keen to open up spaces for the enactment of local democracy, they are equally wary of the danger of leaving political participation to these relatively small and local levels, for, they argue, this could lead to parochialism, and to the confinement of critique and alternatives to a few marginal groups. Thus, to challenge the supposed neo-liberal consensus around growth, and re-politicise economic debates and practices, there is a need to engage with a wider public. For degrowth to be inclusive, it cannot be left in the hands of local or direct participation but needs to be articulated at broader levels, it needs to become a mass movement. This is not to deny the importance of grassroots initiatives, of local politics and “small events”; but for proponents of degrowth, we also need to develop mechanisms that will link up local spaces and actions into a broader political movement, and that will bring debates to a broader audience; and this involves entering parliamentary politics (Ariès, 2007). It is for this reason that the *Parti pour la Décroissance* was created, and that proponents of degrowth support representative democracy. They argue that whilst direct democracy is appropriate at small local level, it cannot be organised beyond small groups of 50 people, thus excluding the majority of citizens (Cheynet, 2007). For supporters of degrowth, representative democracy is essential to the organisation of inclusive collective action and debate. And indeed it seems that this strategy has succeeded in bringing the notion of degrowth to public debate, for as noted earlier, it has become a term with which the press and mainstream politicians have had to engage with (although usually not embrace).

The second issue raised by the emphasis on citizenship concerns motivation is; considering the comfort many of us in the North enjoy as consumers, why would we want the burden, obligations, responsibility of citizenship? Indeed, a quick perusal at the reactions of governments or individuals in the face of rapidly escalating environmental degradation does not bring much hope. Whilst there is a growing number of people and governments who recognise the urgency of ecological threats, they remain unwilling or unable to do anything other than “sustain the unsustainable” to borrow a phrase from Blühdorn (2007); this is, indeed, a response I am commonly faced with when talking to students about the sort of alternative economies we could build in response to environmental and social degradation. Whilst many of the

students seem well aware of the environmental and social wreckage caused by Western style consumption and production, they admit that they remain unwilling to do away with fast food, designer clothing or cheap consumer goods. So short of the authoritarian responses that would eschew the motivation question and that the degrowth movement is so keen to avoid, what could drive people to abandon the comfort of consumerism and take on the obligation of citizenship? Various suggestions have been offered. For example, Dobson (2003, 2006) in his discussion of ecological citizenship argues that it is justice that will motivate us to acknowledge, and act upon, our obligations. He agrees that simply pointing to material asymmetries in the use of ecological resources will not provide sufficient ground for action; there need to be reasons that link the facts of asymmetries to conclusions about how we should act. For him, this is the role of justice: "Justice is the reason that links the facts (unequal occupation of ecological space) to the normative conclusion (act so as to reduce the occupation of ecological space where appropriate)" (Dobson, 2006, p. 450). However, this still leaves open the question of why we should be motivated by justice. Dobson (2006) deals with this in a footnote, where he claims "I hope I will not be asked to explain why people should feel motivated to do justice, as this is a task that has confounded much more powerful minds than my own" (p. 451). Indeed, but then we are back to the beginning.

In a rebuttal of Dobson's thesis, Hayward (2006) tries to eschew the question of motivation by putting forward "resourcefulness" as the main ecological virtue; this he argues "involves the development and exercise of human capacities, and this fulfils part of the substance of a good human life; it also eases the pressure on finite natural phenomena that are needed as resources in (roughly) inverse proportion to resourcefulness" (p. 442). For Hayward, the very definition of resourcefulness avoids the problem of motivation behind Dobson's justice; since resourcefulness relies on the development of human capacities, it also defines the good life. In other words it is what we should all want to develop if we are to become fully human, to realise our potential as human beings. Thus resourcefulness conveniently aligns ecological concerns and personal interests; as individuals deploy ingenuity to reduce their use of resources, they will also develop themselves or realise their human capacities. But as Dobson (2006) notes, it is not clear what is ecological about resourcefulness; indeed, humans can, and have, put their ingenuity to work on many projects, from space exploration, to the exploitation of resources, or the design of war machines and nuclear weapons; and the reduction in the use of natural resources has, so far at least, not been at the forefront of these projects.

Both the values of justice and resourcefulness could be read within a degrowth framework; concerns for justice underpin its avowed republican values of democracy, equality and solidarity, and its articulation of democratic choice and citizenship. A case could also be made for the existence of a parallel between Hayward's resourcefulness and the degrowth movement's emphasis on humanistic value; thus, for example, Ariès' (2005) claim that he would stand for degrowth even without the ecological crisis, but simply to be "human" hints at the development of human capacities beyond that of "consuming". However, maybe the point is not to find what could motivate us to be "good ecological citizens", as any simple answer to this question is bound to be flawed and could be co-opted into another set of instrumental measures, but rather to create spaces where we can act as citizens rather than as consumers, whatever our motives for doing this might be (social justice, environmental justice, self-development). In other words, instead of trying to work out our motivations for acting as citizens, we

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could simply create as many spaces as possible where we would be defined in terms other than economic rationality: not as consumers who want more (for less), who are after value for money, or the latest cheap deal. Whilst the degrowth movement is no more able to answer the big motivation question as any other environmental writers or theories, it can make a small contribution to environmental politics by opening up such spaces.

As I have suggested earlier, degrowth is not merely about consuming and producing less, it is first and foremost about providing a critique of the economy and its colonising effect, and pointing to escape routes. Escaping from the economy thus provides an essential starting point for conceptualising forms of social organisation that do not rely on economic vocabulary, for imagining practices such as consumer strikes that break up with economic rationality, for developing spaces such as local markets in which we can experiment non-economic relations and identity. Thus maybe the main contribution of the degrowth movement to environmental politics and debates is that through its emphasis on “escaping from the economy” it provides both conceptual and practical strategies for challenging the growth economy; and it does this by inviting us to rethink economic practices in terms of democratic choices and acts of citizenship. This is not to say that these non economic spaces do not exist already; the myth of universal commodification tends to ignore the fact that many of us spend a significant proportion of our time providing for ourselves, or helping others provide for themselves, without relying on the market (e.g. Williams, 2004, 2005a, b). In addition, others have made similar points about the need to escape from “orthodox” economic framing; as was mentioned earlier Gibson-Graham (1996, 2002, 2006) have called for a reconceptualisation of economic relations and identity away from capitalocentric thinking. However, considering the serious nature of the ecological and social crisis facing us, multiplying the calls to escape from the economy, and finding as many points of exit as possible may be far from a redundant exercise.

### Notes

1. Growth does not fare much better in terms of social justice. The global inequality in the use of ecological space has been accompanied by growing inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Economic growth fuelled by increased consumption does not bring more wealth to the most needy, as the infamous “tricking down effect” would have us believe. Rather it tends to privilege the richest and those who are already consuming beyond their fair share of the earth resources. Thus whilst the amount of global wealth has never been so high, 1.1 billion people still have no access to drinking water, 1.2 billion people live on less than 1 dollar a day and 2.8 billion on less than 2 dollars a day; this represents 45 per cent of the world population (UNDP, 2006). The poorest 20 per cent of the planet accounted for 1.1 per cent of world income in 2006 against 2.3 per cent in 1970; the richest 20 per cent (mainly living in the North) accounted for 86 per cent of the world income against 70 per cent in 1970.
2. In this regard, Pumar (2005) offers an interesting account of the way in which the neo-liberal understanding of sustainability became institutionalised, and came to efface more radical perspectives.
3. The book was translated in French as *Décroissance: Entropie-Ecologie-Economie* (Georgescu-Roegen, 1979).
4. This emphasis on critique is also reflected in the Parti pour la Décroissance’s manifesto and statutes; the party defines itself as a counter-power and its statutes contain a clause stipulating that any member who becomes elected to a position of executive power will have to resign from the party for the duration of his/her mandate.

5. Although the terms of consumers and citizens are commonly used to index different set of concerns or motives (the pursuit of individual interests and satisfaction versus moral and collective responsibility), the distinction is not always clear cut. As Shaw (2007) notes, given the impact that consumption patterns have on society and the environment, it has become, for some, a vehicle for practising citizenship and building community.

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