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## BOOK REVIEW PERSPECTIVES

### Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*

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#### François Diaz Maurin

DegrowthPedia, Cambridge, MA 02139 USA (email: contact@degrowthpedia.org)

What emerges from Serge Latouche's book, *Farewell to Growth*, is that the global crisis of the modern world is first and foremost a crisis of civilization. Indeed, the "Western" view of humanism brought forth the concept that "humans are superior beings who have natural rights over other species and over nature." This perspective has led us to base our societies on the paradigm of economic growth that now controls each and every aspect of our lives. For that reason, growth can be considered as the main cause of the global crisis. Therefore, renouncing growth requires us to relinquish some aspects of our human nature; in other words, to change to another way of *being* (Ehrenfeld, 2008). This is obviously not the easiest thing for us to do, especially when we realize that our imaginaries are deeply "colonized" by the growth paradigm.

Latouche, a French economist, is regarded as a "prominent defender of [the degrowth] school of thought" (Schneider et al. 2010) and here he does not mince words. His intent is clear from the very start: "[T]hose of us who live in the North already consume too much." Shortly afterward, he provokes us directly by adding that "we would be healthier if we went on a diet," as if we were suffering from obesity. This ironic and provocative tone is second nature for Latouche who supports the idea that we can learn a lot from ecological and social disasters. For instance, he frequently speaks of the "pedagogy of the disaster" (*pédagogie de la catastrophe*). The author uses this approach to "decolonize our imaginaries" from the growth paradigm. But above all, he aims to demonstrate that the degrowth project is at once "desirable, necessary, and possible" if we want to tackle the global crisis.

Degrowth appears to be desirable because growth really is undesirable. Indeed, as Latouche reminds us, "there are physical limits to growth." As the Club of Rome was already pointing out in 1972, and quoted by Latouche, "the never-ending pursuit of growth is incompatible with the planet's 'basics.'" In one word, growth is *unsustainable*. Nowadays, de-

spite all the "new and damning reports [that] are published every day," we continue to ignore the "common sense diagnosis" that "the earth's capacity for regeneration can no longer keep up with demand." Latouche's statement is true: there is no other option than a crisis when throughput-consumption flow overcomes the biosphere's capacity for regeneration. The problem is not only that we do not *understand* the fact that this situation is unsustainable, but, as he argues, that we *refuse* to recognize the inevitable effects of such incompatibility on our consumption and production practices because it would mean questioning our way of life, and so, our human nature.

On the social aspect, both growth and degrowth share the goal of living better. However, one has to admit that this does not occur anymore in the society of growth, even if we always consume and produce more. Latouche goes further by adding that "growth has become humanity's cancer" which reminds one of the American novelist Edward Abbey's (1977) observation that "growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of a cancer cell." Trying to break our addiction to this "human-generated illness" requires us to "decolonize our imaginaries" dominated by growth, in which growth means progress and no growth means going backward. What is needed clearly is a cultural revolution, even though Latouche admits that "it will certainly require another 30 years" to achieve.

According to Latouche, the current economic system is actually a consumer society based on the idea that "there are no limits to our so-called 'needs'" and it is this feature that makes "the system...condemned to grow." He adds that the current economic system, which had been in a "virtuous circle," has ultimately become a "hellish circle." Now, only degrowth can break this spiral.

In the arena of battle over words and ideas, it is important to have a word that cannot be reduced to market logic when dealing with sustainability. Therefore, degrowth, which is like "a UFO in the microcosm of politicking," represents a clear distinction with other lazy ideas such as "sustainable development" that are simply "patching things up so as to avoid having to change them." According to Latouche, it is also important to break the "confusion

between ‘development’ and ‘growth’ that is deliberately sustained by the dominant ideology.”

Latouche then explains that although “capitalism is not the source of all problems and all our powerlessness... a generalized capitalism cannot but destroy the planet in the same way that it is destroying society and anything else that is collective.” However, he adds that a critique of capitalism is not enough since “capitalism, neo-liberal or otherwise, and productivist socialism are both variants on the same project for a growth society.” The very problem is that “growth, seen in terms of the production/jobs/consumption trio, is held responsible for every scourge.” Therefore, a critique of any growth society is needed, and for that reason degrowth is necessary.

Fortunately, this book is not limited to just explaining why a critique of the current socioeconomic system—whether capitalist or socialist—is necessary to achieve sustainability and equity. What the volume actually suggests is another way to see our societies and even ourselves. Although Latouche admits that “de-growth is conceivable only in a de-growth society,” he shows how to exit from the chicken-and-egg dilemma. In other words, the book demonstrates that a degrowth society that is sustainable and self-sufficient is possible.

Indeed, Latouche provides an argument to understand how to “realize the utopia” of the degrowth project. He aims to give policy makers and activists tools for a political program, not necessarily in the electoral sense of the term, but in its strong sense. This “means giving politics new foundations” as the book shows before pointing out the depth of the political crisis. The author stresses the fact that it is necessary to outline “the contours of what a non-growth society might look like” prior to any program for political action. He logically adds that “the preconditions of a degrowth society have yet to be established.”

As a basis of a cultural revolution, Latouche offers “virtuous circles of eight R’s: re-evaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, re-use and recycle.” These principles correspond to a series of eight interdependent changes that “can trigger a process of de-growth” and represent “a reaction to the system’s ‘overs,’” in one word, how to *resist*.

What then gives the book its full added value is probably Latouche’s argument to address questions and objections arising in people’s minds when confronted by the idea of degrowth for the first time. This is all the more important since there is still a lot of confusion in the media that “decided for or against [degrowth] without taking the trouble to find out what was at stake.” Although there is insufficient space to enumerate all of the misconceptions that

Latouche addresses in his book, it is possible to provide the example of what the author says about employment: “If we change our lives, we can solve the problem of unemployment, but if we focus on the problem of jobs for the sake of jobs there is a danger that we will never change society and that we will head straight for disaster.” This sentence perfectly illustrates the approach we should have when trying to “decolonize our imaginaries” from the paradigm of growth.

Lastly, I would like to use the opportunity of this review to urge readers to take up Latouche’s remarkable book because it represents a milestone in understanding what is at stake when evocating the “D-word” of degrowth. For that reason, this volume is not only of interest to policy makers and activists, but for the general public as well. I finish with a quote from the Spanish ecological economist Juan Martinez-Alier during the Second International Degrowth Conference in Barcelona in March 2010: “Degrowth will become the major current of economics” (quoted in Kempf, 2010). Believe it or not, this observation demonstrates the growing influence in Western countries of the degrowth movement as a “concrete utopia” for ecological sustainability and social equity.

### About the Author

François Diaz Maurin is an engineer with expertise in large-scale infrastructure projects in civil engineering and the nuclear industries. He is an unaffiliated scholar who works on sustainability and is the founder of *DegrowthPedia* (<http://degrowthpedia.org>), a new collaborative platform for information and education about economic degrowth.

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### Philip J. Vergragt

Tellus Institute, 11 Arlington Street, Boston, MA 02116 USA  
(email: [pvergragt@tellus.org](mailto:pvergragt@tellus.org))

*Farewell to Growth* is written to provide conceptual underpinning for the “degrowth” concept, philosophy, and strategy: with exponential growth

and a finite earth, we are heading for disaster. Nothing new here, of course, since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*. What *is* new is that degrowth is suddenly hitting the media, especially in France and Spain.

Latouche contends that degrowth is "a political slogan with theoretical implications...an explosive word...it is designed to make it perfectly clear that we must abandon the goal of exponential growth." It is not negative growth; it could be characterized as "a-growth," in the sense to say farewell to a faith or religion (like atheism). It is definitively not the same as "sustainable development," which Latouche criticizes as a pleonasm and an oxymoron at the same time.

The roots of degrowth go back to Thomas Malthus, and especially to Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen who applied the Second Law of Thermodynamics to economics. Contemporary society, however, is addicted to growth. "Development is sacrificing populations and their concrete, local well-being on the altar of an abstract, deterritorialized well-being." To build a degrowth society, we need eight interdependent changes: re-evaluate (harmony with nature); reconceptualize (new values); restructure (the productive apparatus); redistribute; relocalize (local basis); reduce; and reuse/recycle. These changes point toward a concrete utopia. Latouche especially emphasizes relocalize, meaning reinforcing local communities and local economies. He cites various real-world examples of communities that have embarked on this path, though not all of them—in particular the Bedford Zero Energy Development (BedZED) project near London—are convincing.

The degrowth idea, ironically, was born in the era of post-colonial Africa and stems from critiques of the failed development models of the last 50 years. Degrowth can "prevent them [Southern countries] from being trapped in the blind alley." The solution should be self-sufficiency at the village level. However, a precondition for degrowth in the South is degrowth in the North.

In the third part of the book Latouche proposes "a quasi-electoral political programme." He recommends that we "[g]et back to an ecological footprint equal to or smaller than a planet." To do so will entail using ecological taxes; relocating activities; revitalizing peasant agriculture; reducing working hours for job creation; encouraging the production of relational goods (friendships and neighborliness); cutting energy wastes by a factor of four; and declaring a moratorium on technoscientific innovation. In addition, he proposes a global tax on financial transactions and various other taxes. This is a strange mix of utopian and ecological policies.

With respect to labor and full employment, there is a mix of job creation by introducing elements of a green economy, by reducing the working week, and by revaluing the work ethos itself. As Latouche contends, "[t]he basic question is therefore not the precise number of hours we need to work, but the work's role as a social 'value.'" Degrowth implies both a quantitative reduction in working hours and a qualitative transformation of work. "Unless life is re-enchanted, the degrowth project is, too, doomed to failure. We still need to give liberated time a meaning." However, free time is becoming more and more professionalized and industrialized.

As Latouche describes it, degrowth is incompatible with capitalism, although it does not need to get do away entirely with money, markets, profits, and the wage system. Degrowth is not right or left wing and, at least at this point, we do not need a degrowth political party. It is far more important at present to transform ideas and to educate.

The final chapter of the volume poses the question: Is degrowth a humanist mode of thinking? This discussion goes more deeply into the philosophical questions at the root of degrowth. Latouche writes that degrowth "is probably not a humanism, because it is based upon a critique of development, growth, progress, technology, and, ultimately, modernity, and because it implies a break with Western centralism." However, it is not anti-humanist or anti-universalist. The critique of modernity means that we should transcend it, not simply reject it. There is room for eco-anthropocentrism, meaning "that ecological concerns must be a central part of our social, political, cultural, and spiritual preoccupation with human life."

This book provides a powerful ideological basis for degrowth. It certainly offers provocative insights about the philosophical and historical foundations of the degrowth movement. Although the author is reasonably convincing on the level of ideas, he fails completely at the practical and political levels. His analyses may be true globally, but when you try to translate these concepts to your street, your family, your friends, your workplace, or your political party, the flaws become clearly evident. The only place in the book where Latouche is fairly concrete is when he discusses localism. However, no one to date has been able to explain effectively how localized solutions can effectively reverse the powerful forces of globalization.

There are also some less prominent flaws in the book. I do not only mean the "coal-fired nuclear power station" [sic] that appears in the early pages, an observation (or perhaps a translation error?) that illustrates the author's lack of familiarity with anything related to technology. Moreover, Latouche never says anything explicit about two of the major

drivers of growth: the global financial sector and the (at least until recently) veneration of neoclassical economics as a “science.” I find omission of any discussion about global financial markets in this book to be telling. One of the reasons for this situation is that the authors cited in the book are fairly dated and harken back to times before the current era of financial domination (i.e., Andre Gorz, Ivan Illich, Jacques Ellul). A critique of neoclassical economics as it is taught at all major universities around the world should not have been excluded in a book such as *Farewell to Growth*.

I am not personally convinced that “degrowth” is the way to go. Yes, we should be critical of gross domestic product and replace it with an alternative index that more appropriately assesses human and ecological well being. Yes, we should develop small-scale alternatives in sustainable production and consumption, and learn from them. Yes, we should think about how to confront the growth ideology and the

neoliberal market ideology. Yes, we should address dominant power relationships. Yes, we should explore how to frame a social movement that could address these issues. Unfortunately, this book does not lead us in the right direction. Rather, efforts dedicated to working to change lifestyles and values and to motivate systemic changes would more effectively move us down the necessary road. We are still waiting for the appropriate articulation and structuring of such a project.

#### **About the Author**

Philip J. Vergragt is a Senior Associate at the Tellus Institute and a Research Fellow at Clark University. Before moving to the United States, he was Professor of Technology Assessment at TU Delft in the Netherlands and Deputy Director of the Dutch government’s Sustainable Technological Development Program.