

## **Degrowth in South Europe: complementarity in diversity**

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### **1. Introduction: What is Degrowth?**

Degrowth is a slogan, a missile word, and a new social and intellectual movement of the North. The intention is to engage into a very contentious process: the one of making a diagnosis and a prognosis of our society. Degrowth attempts to re-politicize the debate about the much needed socio-ecological transformation, trying to affirm an alternative interpretative frame, to the detriment of the hegemonic representations (and the status quo). When the concept of sustainable development reveals its essence of mere green-washing, degrowth comes as a proposal for radical change. The aim is to overcome the post-political terrain of technocratic management and expert policy making. Take only the “green car”. It is not solving the problem when, globally, more cars travel more often to more places that are further away.

The orthodox slogan from the Brundtland Report (1987), Sustainable Development, implied that economic growth could be ecologically sustainable. This is not true as industrial economies deplete resources and overload sinks. Moreover evidences support the argument that economic growth improves neither well-being nor equity, if not the contrary.

Degrowth carries the idea of a voluntary reduction of the size of the economic system, which implies a reduction of the GDP. However degrowth is not simply about challenging GDP but proposes a framework for transformation to a lower and sustainable level and mode of production and consumption. Degrowth is a path towards social justice, well being and ecological sustainability. It involves actions at both individual and collective level to reduce pressure on humans and ecosystems, challenging our market based imaginary and implying a wide and deep democratization of societies. Degrowth is about people, rather than technology, market or experts, deciding on the direction of societal evolution. Furthermore it implies giving meaning to human life which is not per se associated with conspicuous consumption and materialism.

Degrowth is a drainage basin where a variety of ideas, practical alternatives and people have converged to name a different future. Degrowth as a concept carries a power of articulation, debate and complementarity. It is not by chance that the movement has seen since the beginning the emergence of networks. Degrowth takes position in one of the debates that earlier movements have

always avoided (the debate on economic growth, the size of industrial society, in addition to the type of work, the type of production and consumption). It is not just about another world, but about a world where everybody can simply live, which is what degrowth is all about. Degrowth brings the idea of combined changes of values, starting by challenging economic growth, key belief of capitalism, but that different revolutions (think of 1917 in Russia and the eastern bloc transition) have not managed to challenge until now. And that large movements were not able to express. The combination of all concerns, types of action and alternative propositions begins to show some coherence. The diversity of sources is where the strength and novelty of the movement comes from. Degrowth has the potential to become an important social movement as it has some of its characteristics in terms of diversity of strategy, the profound debate it generates and the multitude of anonymous actors.

In this article we first briefly describe how the movement started in France, Italy and Spain. For the diagnosis of society, meaning identifying problems and causes, the movement draws inspiration from a number of intellectual sources that we briefly review. For what concerns the prognosis, the movement heterogeneity will also be illustrated by presenting its main diverse strategies, actors and political propositions.

## 2. A short history

Some of the degrowth ideas have been part of philosophical debates for centuries. Should we trace back sources of degrowth to the Greeks and the critics of hubris? Diogenes in his barrel may have been one of the early degrowth supporters.

The word 'Décroissance' (french for degrowth) appeared for the first time in the seventies in different french publications (Amar, 1976<sup>1</sup>; Gorz, 1977<sup>2</sup>; Georgescu-Roegen, 1979<sup>3</sup>) in the follow-up of the club of Rome report ('The limits to growth'). However "Décroissance" only becomes an activist slogan in France from 2001, in Italy from 2004 ('Decrescita'), in Catalonia (Spain) from 2006 ('Decreixement' and 'Decrecimiento'). The English term 'Degrowth' gets accepted at the first degrowth conference in Paris in 2008, which also marks the initiation of degrowth as academic research area and international civil society debate.

### France

The term *Decroissance* was sitting around for quite some time but without being central in neither intellectual debates or activists's movements. Antecedents can be found in the tradition of Jacques Ellul, Francois Partant, Bernard Charbonneau a circle of intellectuals developing critics to development. The social movement started in Lyon, where there was an active concentration of environmental associations and social actors, especially in the Croix-Rousse (an important center of resistance) developing combinations of actions for car-free cities, meals in the streets, food cooperatives, anti-advertising, etc. The proper debate started at the beginning of 2002 with a special issue of the ecologist magazine Silence -Ecology, Alternatives and Non-violence- edited by Vincent Cheynet and Bruno Clémentin. The same year the conference "Défaire le développement, refaire le monde" (Unmake development, remake the world) takes place at UNESCO in Paris, encountering an unattended success. In 2004 degrowth enters the public debate. The monthly magazine La Décroissance, le journal de la joie de vivre is launched, selling today around 30.000 copies. The same year an author of this article, activist and researcher, undertakes a tour with a donkey for more

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<sup>1</sup> André Amar, Les cahiers de la Nef, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> André Gorz, Écologie et liberté (éd. Galilée), 1977

<sup>3</sup> Georgescu-Roegen N. Demain la décroissance : entropie-écologie-économie », preface and translation by Ivo Rens and Jacques Grinevald (Lausanne, éd. Pierre-Marcel Favre), 1979.

than one year, popularising the idea through numerous public debates. Since then other marches have been organized, a number of local degrowth groups have emerged. These groups are active in all range of actions from opposition to alternatives, intellectual debates and divulgation, political activities with an important focus on the grass-root.<sup>4</sup> Some attempts have also been made to engage politically in a more traditional way, through a party or political movement. However they have remained very marginal. As usual in the French tradition, the intellectual debate has been very rich leading to numerous publications, with the review *Entropia*, founded in 2006, as a reference and Serge Latouche as the best know writer. The debate on *Décroissance* has reached a large part of the population, people have heard about it, as the press, including the mainstream one, regularly mentions the issue.

## Italy

The Italian 'Rete per la decrescita' (Network for Degrowth; [www.decrescita.it](http://www.decrescita.it)) is founded in 2004 by a group of activists and intellectuals. They come from experiences of solidarity economy, criticism to development, anti-utilitarianism and bio-economics. Leading characters are the bio-economist Mauro Bonaiuti, the ex-advertiser and activist Dalma Domeneghini and the sociologist Marco Deriu. The group engages into both theorisation and divulgation. Their main concern is a collective reflection on the complexity of socio-cultural dynamics and the linkages with the current system of production and consumption. Seminars, conferences and a summer school are organized regularly, while several books<sup>5</sup> and a review called 'La Decrescita' are published. A part from the 'Rete per la decrescita' presented beforehand, the 'Movement for happy degrowth', leaded by Maurizio Pallante, has also been very active especially in promoting good practices (do it yourself,...). If the former holds a more complex discourse, the later has gained more popularity due to a more accessible (simplified) discourse. A wide variety of groups joined the debate, from progressive catholics up to marxists<sup>6</sup>. Many other collectives exist, including some with explicit intentions of entering into parliamentary politics (such as the recents 'Costituente ecologista' and 'Uniti, ma diversi') or the more innovative proposal of 'Rigenerazioni' for a non-electoral political formation.

## Catalonia (Spain)

The movement started in Barcelona and its region, Catalonia. Since 2005 activists debated about the energy crisis and potential alternatives in the forum of a web page ([www.crisisenergetica.org](http://www.crisisenergetica.org)). In 2006 the french book 'Objective degrowth'<sup>7</sup> is translated into catalan and the environmental organization 'Una sola terra' organizes a conference called "Degrowth to save the planet". In 2007 the group 'Entesa pel decreixement' is founded in Barcelona ([www.decreixement.net](http://www.decreixement.net)). Many of the activists had been active in the anti-globalization movement, but also in environmentalist, pacifist and libertarian collectives. In 2008 a march with bicycles lead to the creation of the Xarxa pel Decreixement (Network for degrowth) aiming to promote degrowth discourse and practices in all Catalonia. About three hundred people gathered at the end of the march to build the network. The network articulates groups for their geographic location and their thematic focus (education, food, communication, contra-hegemonic economy, defense of the territory,...).

Partly influenced by the left-libertarian movements with a focus on autonomy and self-management, the Catalan movement for degrowth always intended to engage with other social movements and practices based on anti-capitalism. On the other hand Degrowth has often been endorsed as a baseline for groups involved in environmental conflicts (dealing with water, energy, infrastructures or climate change), agroecology, solidarity economy, education and awareness-

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<sup>4</sup> See, for more information on the debates and local groups, [www.dcroissance.info](http://www.dcroissance.info)

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Mauro Bonaiuti, *From Bioeconomics to Degrowth* (Routledge), 2011.

<sup>6</sup> See, for exampe, the essay 'Marx and Degrowth' by Badiale and Bontempelli, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard M, Cheynet V, Clémentin B, editors. *Objectif décroissance*. Lyon, France: Parangon/Vs; 2003.

raising<sup>8</sup>. Currently the most ambitious project in this sense is the 'integral cooperative'<sup>9</sup> which tries to include ways of satisfying all basic human needs. A local currency, the 'ECOS', is used for exchanges.

The movement has also arrived into academia; for example with a group of researchers of the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (including Joan Martinez Alier and Giorgios Kallis), or professors like Carlos Taibo or Joaquim Sempere.

Many other groups are now active in all Spain ([www.decrecimiento.info](http://www.decrecimiento.info)) and an attempt is being made to connect to each other. Some historical civil society organizations have come on board, like the most important spanish network of environmental organizations called Ecologistas en Acción ([www.ecologistasenaccion.org](http://www.ecologistasenaccion.org)), in link with the trade union CGT.

Other countries

Other European countries have active degrowth movements especially in francophone parts of Belgium and Switzerland. The movement is spreading. Lately we assist to a multiplication of groups and activities all over the world, from Porto Rico to Norway, from Mexico to Canada. For example, more than fifty groups from the whole world organized a Pic-Nic for Degrowth the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2010 (<http://picnic4degrowth.net/>). This initiative was launched after the Barcelona Conference with the aim of going from the international to the local level. Participants wanted to bring home the message. It has been successful to visualize existing groups around the world and facilitate the formation of new ones. Groups and networks are more likely to emerge from such convivial initiatives than from a smoky room with three illuminated founders.

### 3. The intellectual sources: Why degrowth?

We have seen a movement proposing a voluntary economic degrowth has been developing. In general terms Degrowth is grounded in a variety of areas. Following Fabrice Flipo, we refer to them as the sources of degrowth<sup>10</sup>. Within **anthropology** concerns have been raised with commodification of human relations, cultural uniformization and criticism to development, both as imaginary and socio-historical realities. Another concern is related to the meaning of life with the idea that non-material exchange and poetry of life are important. Degrowth also calls for a deepening (more direct and participative) and a widening of **democracy**. Ecology is an obvious source, which is linked to the direct destruction of ecosystems. Moreover, in the line of Georgescu-Roegen and **ecological economics**, another concern regard the fact that degrowth is inevitable (i.e. from peak oil to peak everything). Finally **Justice** is a major concern for degrowth in its social and economic dimensions.

The review presented is not exhaustive. Other sources of inspiration could be mentioned such as (eco)feminism, political ecology, non violence. The point however is to show the diversity of arguments that people deploy to argue in favour of degrowth, depending often on their socio-historical context and previous political experience. The diversity shows Degrowth is far from an ideology.

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<sup>8</sup> For a quick overview see the documentary Homage to Catalonia II (available in English), [www.homenatgeacatalunyaaii.org](http://www.homenatgeacatalunyaaii.org).

<sup>9</sup> Cooperativa Integral Catalana: <http://cooperativa.ecoxarxes.cat/>

<sup>10</sup> Flipo F, « Voyage dans la galaxie décroissante », *Mouvements*, n° 50, 2007/2, p. 143-151.

The movement is not only based on ideas (or iconic writings), but on practices as presented hereafter mentioning actors and strategies. .

#### **4. Actors: Who supports degrowth ?**

At first instance degrowth is an idea that is debated in society by many people, even in mainstream media, and that receives much more support than usually believed if we remain at disinterested political level. There is a constellation of groups and networks explicitly for degrowth. Practitioners, activists and researchers act and interact in multiple levels and dimensions. There are minorities in some organizations, like trade unions and political movements (or parties) actively supporting degrowth. There is then a much larger group of people and collectives which both contributed to the raise and conceptualization of the movement and which adopt degrowth as the horizon of their action. This includes the areas of agroecology, environmental justice, environmental conflicts and defense of the territory (against infrastructures, real state speculation,...), neo-rurals, critical consumption, international cooperation, solidarity economy, local currencies, exchange markets, eco-villages, do it your-self, reclaim the fields and the streets, alternative mobility (bicycles,...), urban gardens, non-violence and pacifism, anti-advertisement, preventive and alternative medicine, ...

Great potentials exist for alliances. The Degrowth movement interacts in the North with Transition Towns, Inclusive Democracy, Permaculture,... Similarly it finds correspondents in the South such as Buen Vivir, Environmentalism of the Poor, Crisis of civilizations, Via Campesina etc.

#### **5. Complementary Strategies of the degrowth social movement**

The multi-level nature of our complex societies obliges the degrowth movement to follow multiple strategies. This has led to debates.

Firstly, there have been debates between activist movements that focus on opposition, for example the ones fighting infrastructures (i.e. highways, incinerators, big dams, nuclear plants etc.), and the ones promoting alternatives (i.e. bicycles, reuse, solar panels etc.)

The other debate is between the one who focus on the national/international political level against the ones that consider that action should be focused on the local level. Similarly people debate about the importance of individual and collective action.

Another big debate has been taking place between degrowth supporters who focus on replacing existing institutions (e.g. financial institutions) and the ones who consider that institutions only need some adaptations and should on the contrary be defended (e.g. social security).

There has also been a debate between the ones who give priority to practical action at either grass-root or political level and the ones who prefer doing theoretical analysis and denouncing the “growth religion”.

Most, if not all, strategies are appearing within each source of degrowth mentioned above. A degrowth perspective that avoids reductionisms of all kinds would welcome the diversity and the complementarity of strategies (and sources). Although how much of each one is needed remain subject of debate and determines the specialization of the actors. Again degrowth is far from a guideline of action.

Let's now explore a number of practices undertaken by the movement as examples of the different strategies.

### 1) Dissensus: Financial civil disobedience

On September 17th, 2008, the catalan degrowth activist, Enric Duran, publicly announced that he had 'robbed' dozens of Spanish banks of nearly a half-million euro as part of political action to denounce what he termed the predatory capitalist system and finance various anti-capitalist movements. From 2006 to 2008, Duran took out 68 commercial and personal loans from 39 banks with no guarantees or property as collateral. Among the financed projects, there was the magazine *Crisis* distributed in 200.000 copies by militants in all Catalunya. This informed people on various issues such as the energy crisis (i.e. peak oil), the creation of money as debt, the linkages among banks, political parties and media. Six months later came the magazine *Podemos! Vivir sin capitalismo* (We can! Live without capitalism) with 350.000 copies distributed in all Spain. This was about concrete alternatives to what had been denounced with the first publication (food production, transport, banks,...). In other words *Crisis* was the diagnosis, while *Podem* the prognosis.

### 2) Theorisation: First and Second International Conferences on Economic Degrowth for ecological sustainability and social equity (Paris 2008<sup>11</sup> and Barcelona 2010<sup>12</sup>)

The Association Research & Degrowth (R&D) organized the first academic conference in April 2008. More than 140 scientists from all disciplines participated from thirty different countries. A second one was organized two years later in Barcelona with 500 people from fifty different countries. The objective was to create cooperative research bringing together scientists, practitioners and activists. Thirty working groups were held to elaborate, discuss and develop concrete policy proposals and research priorities in different areas (money, work, infrastructure, advertising, natural resources, housing etc.). Participatory methods were used to test a new model of organizing conferences, academic but with the participation of the civil society.

These encounters allowed to build an informal network, a community of people active on degrowth and willing to exchange. Degrowth has now become a subject of scientific publication, let us cite the *Journal of Cleaner Production*<sup>13</sup>, more are to come.

More conferences are planned in the future, the multiplicity of proposals secures that the academic involvement will intensively go on.

### 3) Political proposals

An extract from the Barcelona Declaration can give an idea of the types of political proposals put forward and debated in the movement.

A participative process with working groups was proposed at the Barcelona conference. The novelty comes from the juxtaposition of proposals creating improved coherence.

“A combination of proposals evolved from the discussions, including: facilitation of local currencies; gradual elimination of fiat money and reforms of interest; promotion of small scale, self-managed not-for-profit companies; defense and expansion of local commons and establishment of

<sup>11</sup> Flipo F, Schneider F, editors. Proceedings of the First Conference for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity. Paris: Research & Degrowth, Telecom Sud-Paris; 2008. <http://events.it-sudparis.eu/degrowthconference/en/>

<sup>12</sup> [www.degrowth.eu](http://www.degrowth.eu)

<sup>13</sup> Kallis G, Schneider F, Martinez-Alier J (Eds). Growth, Recession or Degrowth for Sustainability and Equity? Special Issue J. of Cleaner Production. Volume 18, Issue 6, Pages 511-606 (April 2010).

new jurisdictions for global commons; establishment of integrated policies of reduced working hours (work-sharing) and introduction of a basic income; institutionalization of an income ceiling based on maximum-minimum ratios; discouragement of overconsumption of non-durable goods and under-use of durables by regulation, taxation or bottom-up approaches; abandonment of large-scale infrastructure such as nuclear plants, dams, incinerators, high-speed transportation; conversion of car-based infrastructure to walking, biking and open common spaces; taxation of excessive advertising and its prohibition from public spaces; support for environmental justice movements of the South that struggle against resource extraction; introduction of global extractive moratoria in areas with high biodiversity and cultural value, and compensation for leaving resources in the ground; denouncement of top-down population control measures and support of women's reproductive rights, conscious procreation and the right to free migration while welcoming a decrease in world birth rates; and de-commercialization of politics and enhancement of direct participation in decision-making.”

#### 4) Divulcation and activism: Catalan march and network

In spring 2008 a march with bicycles takes place for three months across all Catalonia. The energetic crisis and the financial system are the main issues debated in public meetings. The documentary 'Money as debt' by Paul Grignon is regularly shown (the financial crisis had yet to come!). Furthermore the march represents an opportunity to contact and gradually articulate local groups with affinities. The march ends with a meeting of 350 people from all Catalonia. People discuss about existing and future projects in thirteen working groups on topics such as housing, food, work, agriculture, and transport among others. Participants expressed their intention to remain in contact to exchange and collaborate so that the network, 'Xarxa pel Decreixement', is founded. Two years after, the network is currently under a process of auto-evaluation. The goals for the network are to become a meeting, exchange and collective action point, to strengthen local groups and create synergy among network nodes and to promote degrowth discourses and practices. Network type of organization offers interesting potentialities, such as sharing common resources and web site. On the other hand, the network has a complex structure and difficulties in organization and coordination of nodes, and lacks a specific discourse. Each group in the network has autonomy to decide, so there is diversity on strategies and activities but a lack of a common long-term strategy. Also, the network has been a laboratory of projects such as complementary currencies, groups of action on inclusive democracy or the integral cooperative that are currently going on.

#### 5) Alternatives: voluntary simplicity, solidarity economy and the Integral Cooperative

One of the slogan has been “to live better with less”. People practice voluntary simplicity<sup>14</sup>, down-shifting and slow down life's pace. However they also look to produce and exchange goods differently. Some degrowth supporters are in favour of markets, holding they are local and embedded in social institutions that hold some sort of control (i.e. Italian RES, Reti di economia solidale; Solidarity economy networks).

In Catalonia, the Integral Cooperative<sup>15</sup> is a project that put into practice both economic and political self-management with the egalitarian participation of its members. It is said to be integral in two senses. First because it aims to include all basic economic aspects such as production, consumption, financing and own currency; second because it intends to integrate all sectors of activities essential for living. It is considered as a transitional initiative to allow the building up of a way of living where both banks and states are unnecessary.

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<sup>14</sup> Serge Mongeau, *La simplicité volontaire*, Éditions Québec/Amérique, Montréal, 1985, 151 pages.

<sup>15</sup> Cooperativa Integral Catalana: <http://cooperativa.ecoxarxes.cat/>

## 6) Institutions: Yasuni ITT, a proposal to leave oil in the ground

Yasuni ITT Initiative is a very inspiring proposal from Ecuador: 'leave oil in the ground'. It has not been carried out in name of degrowth, but comes from a political context in the South that goes in the same direction of change. The government asks for a compensation by the international community (50% of the oil reserve value, around 3.600 millions US dollars) to leave 846 millions of oil barrels where they are. This measure would simultaneously avoid CO2 emissions (more than 400 million tons), protect both biodiversity and indigenous people in voluntary isolation in the Yasuni National Park and promote social development in Ecuador (for example with investments in renewable energies and policies for poverty reduction).

Moving back to Europe one can find proposals for new institutions, as well as actions for the defense, reform or suppression of existing ones. In this sense we can mention the proposal for a basic income, the demands for the reform of the financial and banking system and the struggles to protect the commons against privatization.

## 6. Conclusion

The growth paradigm is a pivotal belief to be challenged, as it blocks political action at all scales, from societal to local. Ecological and social alternatives will not be possible if growth continues to be the religion of our societies. While mainly based in the south of Europe at this point, the spreading of the Degrowth movement in Germany and else where is fundamental. It is its diverse nature that constitutes the real novelty of the degrowth movement. We have seen that degrowth is at the crossroad of philosophies. Each intellectual source brings reasons to challenge growth that complements each other (anthropology, democracy, ecology, equity, non violence, feminism etc.). When it comes to actions, the degrowth movement has been proposing very complementary strategies (opposition, alternatives, research and divulgation, political actions etc.) on a diversity of complementary themes leading to a complementary set of proposals.

The challenge to reductionism is central for degrowth. Even if having an ideology and simple guidelines of action may seem attractive to some people, we have good reasons to avoid this path. First because it does not translate the reality of degrowth (or growth). Second because reductionism of past movements have either led to failure, by keeping movements totally marginal, or by creating monsters (i.e. USSR). We should devote efforts for understanding the complementarities, rather than falling into endless negative conflicts or 'narcissism of small differences'. Focusing on one aspect only brings failure as each approach and solution complements each other. Focusing only on voluntary simplicity or only theory or only on challenging economic structures is the recipe for failure. Similarly if we only focus on reducing consumption would just lead to excess production, while focusing only on reducing production would bring shortage. Neglecting redistribution would leave out one of the important reason for degrowth in the first place. On the other hand when different isolated proposals are combined, as in the Barcelona declaration, coherence begins to appear while the debate always remains alive.

Clearly the capacity of the degrowth movement to keep the debate running on very relevant issues while managing to successfully combine different strategies will be the key for success. On the other hand all of this is not without traps. There is the risk of recuperation by capitalism (and forgetting about degrowth), this is what happens with green consumerism. Until now degrowth has shown a remarkable capacity to avoid the recuperation. Another danger would be that it creates a new heteronomous monster, by proposing a strict top-down plan for degrowth (a type of USSR that would be for degrowth). For this it is very important that the movement continues on its strong involvement with deliberative democracy. Another danger is that the multi-level and society vision related to the idea of change of imaginary gets lost, and that the confrontation to the crisis leads to fragmentation of society in closed communities unable to coordinate for consuming less resources

and share. We could close to our own community, our own identity and defending our own sustainability against the rest of the world. The degrowth that we propose is about avoiding this. On the opposite the idea is to avoid intolerance among people, nations and cultures by avoiding reductionism at all levels. Degrowth promotes then open communities and understanding for the concerns of the others in the neighborhood, city and planet level and a change of imaginary that would enable us to share.

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