



## Democracies with a future: Degrowth and the democratic tradition

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### ABSTRACT

The interrogation of a possible connection between degrowth and democracy inspires some questions of political epistemology. Is degrowth a socio-economic project which can be simply proposed as an “issue” and a “goal” in the democratic representative system, without discussing forms and processes of the political institutions themselves? Is the degrowth perspective fully compatible with the democratic theories and practices as we currently know them?

The perspective of degrowth allows a radical enlightenment of the blind spots of “really existing” democracies but also of the democratic theory. From a factual point of view, we need to acknowledge the existence of an historical connection between economic and political freedoms, since the claim for the autonomy of business has historically been a way to guarantee freedoms and civil rights to citizens, against the tyranny of the central political and religious authorities. Nevertheless, in the current configuration of market societies, the centre of the real power has largely moved from the political and institutional sphere to the economic one. Today the re-foundation of a democratic freedom and of new civil rights should be affirmed against a more and more pervasive economic tyranny. On this basis, a democratic re-foundation in the perspective of degrowth – which includes ecological, social and anthropological challenges – might be imagined.

The second part of this paper will be devoted to the formulation of hypotheses about which foundations might be imagined for a radical reform of the democratic theory and institutions, building on degrowth perspective. From the point of view of the political system, degrowth represents a new “cleavage” if confronted with the historical ones on which classical democracies have been structured. From the point of view of the political organization, degrowth clashes with the traditional competitive electoral models; so I will illustrate some perspectives for a possible reconstruction. From the point of view of a theoretical and institutional re-foundation of democratic regimes, degrowth calls for a philosophical acknowledgement of ecological and social limits, in terms of the institution of a new socio-environmental public sphere which can lead to new constituent processes and to the invention of new deliberative arenas, accordingly introducing different space and time criteria, if compared to the ones we are used to.

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The debate surrounding the theme of democracy and degrowth covers many different questions from the reflections on sustainability and ecological democracy, to the discussion on equality and social rights, and on north–south relations and global justice. Investigating the possible link between degrowth and democracy leads us immediately to questions of political epistemology. To begin with, is the degrowth programme one that can simply be brought into the political–electoral

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arena and proposed to an electorate in normal competition with other programmes? Or does degrowth recall the idea of a wider reconfiguration of the objectives of politics in a well-being society?

Second, does the theme of degrowth represent a reading of conflict and a political view that may be proposed as one “theme” or “objective” among others, simply to be picked up by one or more traditional parties (or possible new parties) without any discussion of the forms and processes of political institutions? Or does the perspective of degrowth imply also the need for a deep reform of the institutions and of the democratic forms of participation?

From an ecological point of view the least that can be said, is that we are faced with questions that have until now been at the very margins of democratic tradition and reflection. As the Canadian scholar Richard Swift affirms “The environmental dimension is something relatively new for democratic thinkers to cope with. Classical democratic theory just assumed a bountiful nature where endless free goods were there for human enjoyment” [1].

After the second world war, for some decades resources seemed to be abundant, growth guaranteed the improvement of working conditions and of social protection systems, and the effects of the impact of the industrial and technological system were not acknowledged as a possible serious threat to ecosystems. In this period of time, political institutions were conceived to maximise the consumption of resources and energy from an environment seen as an external resource rather than a *political context*. Now we find ourselves faced with a world that is “full to capacity” [2], developed, industrialised, urbanised. Today the questions of the impact of our technologies and production processes, our standards of consumption, demographic transformations, and thus evaluations of risk, of self-limitation, and of the responsible assumption of intergenerational duties, impose themselves as crucial aspects of a political rethink.

### 1. Democracy and the free market

From a social and economic point of view, the question is one of recognising that in western political history the democratic system took shape and was structured through a deep and lasting connection with the institutions of the free market and the logics of progress, growth and development. Timothy Mitchell, for example, in his book *Petrocratia. La démocratie à l'âge du carbone*, has reconstructed from an historical point of view the connection among the exploitation of fossil fuels, the development of a strong trade union movement, and the affirmation of modern democracies and of a growth economy [3].

It may be said that this dependence on the logic of growth regards not only economic institutions but also political institutions. In fact a historical link between the freedom of economic initiative and political freedom can be traced. This is because demands for business autonomy have historically provided a path towards guaranteeing the freedom and civil rights of the citizen against the tyranny of central political and religious authorities (monarch, state, or church). Therefore, from a historical perspective, the emancipatory role played by free economic initiative in the construction of political democracy cannot be denied [4].

It is a fact that the development of democratic regimes, the construction of democratic consensus, is intertwined with the history of growth and the market, of access to and the promotion of consumption. The same imaginary that forms the basis of democratic consensus is historically based on the promise of growth. Social consensus in post second world war liberal democratic societies was founded on the centrality of productive work, an ethic of sacrifice and the promise of “collective upward mobility” [5]. At the same time, the compromise of welfare state which bridled the most problematic effects of free market and assured a strong social integration, made the democratic system more and more dependent on the capitalistic economy through taxation. Nevertheless the fact of having thought of personal and social well-being in principally material terms, and the fact of having confided the realisation of that objective to the market, has had heavy consequences. In fact economic growth has been set above (and conceived as a pre-condition of) any policy of justice and redistribution. But the fact of directing all the efforts and resources of politics towards the objective of economic growth has meant to assign more and more power to the most relevant economic actors.

From this point of view, the present crisis of democracy can be read as the crisis of the centrality of the traditional political sphere and of the prerogatives of the State in its capacity to govern society and economy. We are not in front of differentiated systems, where everyone functions autonomously, but in front of a more and more ambiguous and rampant interpenetration between economic interests and political decisions. In the last decades, we have faced a *translatio imperii* from the political system to other centers of power, especially economic ones: public centers of power, not necessarily democratically ruled (such as G8, World Bank, IMF, WTO, European Commission, OECD, and ECB), or other private and undemocratic subjects (boards of directors of corporations, directions of big banks, big investors, rating agencies, etc.) and sometimes even occult powers. Many relevant decisions for the fate of our future are taken outside any democratic control.

There are different forms of interpenetration of the political sphere by the economic world.

First of all, the big economic actors spend hundreds of thousands of Dollars to support the electoral campaign of a candidate or of a political party in order to obtain laws or decisions favourable to their interests.

At another level, the action is assigned to professional lobbyists. The lobbyists officially registered in Washington are almost 13,000, with a turnover of around 3.50 billion Dollars per year. The ones operating in Brussels are almost 15,000, with a turnover of around 1 billion Euros per year. Certainly, in a democracy it is allowed to represent all the interests, but it is clear that in such a lobbying activity the ones who can count on the higher economic resources have more (legal and illegal) possibilities to get results. In fact there is a strong asymmetry in the possibility to defend the interests of companies and the ones of citizens.

In several countries the entrepreneurs play directly an important and manifest political role. We refer e.g., to the action of people such Rupert Murdoch, owner of a vast business empire, particularly in the area of mass communication, or Silvio Berlusconi, an important entrepreneur who in Italy has successfully applied the traditional sales and marketing strategies to the political sphere, thanks to the control of private and public television system. But they are not isolated cases.

With the advent of globalization, an array of tools and faculties characteristic of the nation State are becoming increasingly ineffective and impotent in front of the advancing of a transnational economic logic and of its new actors: multinational corporations, financial markets, international institutions. Multinational corporations and financial and economic elites are increasingly avoiding democratic control and contribution in terms of taxation, compliance with social and environmental laws, protection of workers' rights and, more generally, respect for citizens and populations.

Looking ahead, it must be emphasized that, in several key areas – media, energy, information technology, biotechnology, food, medicines, military services, etc. – a number of vast business empires with a dominant market position are growing; in fact they more and more represent a challenge and a threat of depletion of freedom and democratic sovereignty.

In the new global context, another repercussion on the democratic process is the “mandatory nature of the assessments made by global financial markets on national positions” [6]. This influence is particularly evident in the present time, as we have seen in summer 2011 with the debt and financial exposure of Greece, Italy and even of the U.S. In this situation, the ministers of economy define their social, economic and financial reforms, having an eye primarily on the possible reactions of financial markets. As Jürgen Habermas summed up, “today they are the states to be incorporated into the markets, rather than national economies to be incorporated into the boundaries of the state” [7]; this results in the fact that a single democratic state no longer has the strength to protect citizens from decisions of non-democratic actors and from processes born outside its borders.

Even rating agencies like Moody's, Standard & Poor's and Fitch have a power which is stronger than ever, even if based on what is formally a simple “opinion”. Judging not only the financial solidity of banks and companies, but also that of States and governments, and then having the authority to define the reliability and attractiveness of a country for international investors, they can have a very strong economic and political influence.

Most Western democracies – notably Greece, Portugal, Ireland, France, Germany, Spain and even the U.S. – are now heavily indebted with the international financial system and thus they are effectively exposed against the latter. At present, financial markets have become political – albeit impersonal – subjects. Or at least politicians behave as if markets were independent subjects that can express judgments or preferences: condemnation of the policies of public intervention, approval of containment and cutting of the public spending of the privatization policies, etc. But in any case it is true that the attack by the big financial speculators to a country or to an economic area may decide the political fate of a government and at the end the fate of people themselves.

In the current scenario, there are therefore a series of “hybrid figures” that move between the economic and the political sphere in a supranational space with a power that rivals that of many state actors and institutions [8].

On the other hand, the political role of guidance and assurance played by the State in the post second war – both as an entrepreneur and as a guarantor of social protection, through the welfare system – is dramatically weakening. The reform and dismantling of the welfare state undermines the modern forms of social solidarity, while the end of full employment and the spread of unemployment and of the precarious work make people more vulnerable to blackmail.

Thus, what Americans call “free market democracy” is in fact a regime with a strong power of market actors and a weak citizen power. As Reich [9], who sought to reconstruct and highlight the link between the birth of super-capitalism and the decline of democracy, has noted, the market is ever more suited to satisfy a whole series of needs and desires, to the strangest and most frivolous, yet democracy is becoming progressively less sensitive to our demands as citizens calling for more just rules, a cleaner environment, healthier food, the protection of land, the conservation of artistic or monumental heritage or the defence of common goods. Both the political and economic systems are calibrated towards the demands of the shareholders and consumers, not the citizens.

This imbalance, according to Reich, is due to the fact that economic actors are able to aggregate the interests of their shareholders or investors in large blocks of power, while the instruments of representation and protection of citizens are increasingly weakened or unfit to address this level.

The question now is what happens when an economic and political system founded on the logic of the continuous solicitation of needs and consumption reveals itself to be unsustainable in economic, ecological and social terms?

“It would seem – writes the political scientist Robert Cox – that a radical change in patterns of consumption will become essential to maintenance of the biosphere. When in preparation for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, then US President George Bush said ‘Our lifestyle is not open to negotiation’, he was implicitly acknowledging that a change of lifestyle may be necessary to biospheric survival and at the same time acknowledging that political survival in modern liberal democracies makes it highly risky for politicians to advocate. [...] Is the survival of the biosphere incompatible with liberal democracy? Will democratic politics continue to press to maximizing consumerism?” [10].

Therefore the problem is not only the reorganization of the centers of political and economic power, but also to avoid turning democracy into a mere political consumer market or to strengthen the culture of democratic citizenship among the people. In general terms it can be said that in modern democracies the space for deliberation and even for control by citizens is more and more limited or, like it often happens on a economic and financial plan, subjected to a condition of probation (consider the role of institutions as the IMF or ECB in the recent crisis in Greece and Italy), while the economic actors are rapidly gaining a space of control, influence and even of a more significant political initiative.

If at the beginning of the modern path towards democracy, the guarantee of free economic initiative and private property rights assured protection against blackmail and control by political authorities, currently the situation is almost reversed. In their ever-expansion, private property and free enterprises have ended up going beyond the traditional channel of the democratic state, both in terms of space and of power, creating economic and power inequalities of such proportions as to represent today a real threat to citizens and democratic system.

The possession and control of large information and communication systems that influence the understanding of public opinion on important elements of the political agenda, the ability to secure consensus through the massive inflow of economic resources in the electoral market, the possibility to influence orientations and decisions of representative bodies through a systematic action of pressure from the economic lobbies, the ability to divert resources from the tax levy, the possibility to speculate on basic goods such as real estate, raw materials or food; these are all examples of the extraordinary power assumed by economic actors in the so-called democratic countries and of the chasm that has opened between the ideal of political equality that underlies the idea of democracy and the asymmetries of opportunities in real life. The result is that citizens are in fact at the mercy of immense and impersonal powers, which are difficult to be controlled, at least with the current instruments of traditional democracies [11]. In this sense one can say that today, in the Western democracy, the threat of tyranny and the risks to personal freedom come more from economic powers rather than political ones.

In short, the balance between capitalism, democracy, well-being and social security, and between economic freedom and political rights, that had been maintained for several decades, has been broken as a result of globalization of economy on the one hand and on the other hand of the limits of a system structured on the need for continued growth in production, profits and consumption.

In this sense, the proposal of degrowth represents an attempt to reopen a discussion on social goals outside a political sphere which seems limited to the narrow arena of the traditional institutions of representative democracy, and to connect it with a wider reconfiguration of the same public sphere.

## 2. Democracy and its limits

A further problem is that the consequences and responsibilities falling to future generations as a result of the choices made by the current generation will in fact most likely be much wider and deeper than in the past [12,13]. For the first time current generations find themselves in a position to affect the living conditions of generations to come radically. One thinks of themes such as the exhaustion of natural resources and climate change.

This issue of intergenerational responsibility is not considered by classical political/democratic theory. Democratic theory refutes all references whatsoever to external limits posed to the freedom of choice of those in government or the majority. According to Cornelius Castoriadis, “from the moment that society no longer accepts any transcendental or simply inherited norm onwards, there is nothing that can intrinsically fix the limits beyond which power should cease” [14].

What we are missing today is in fact precisely that sense of limitation that is not merely an appanage of democracy. For Cornelius Castoriadis democracy is intrinsically a regime of self-limitation. But for reasons of clarity it is useful to distinguish between limits and self-limitation. While in many traditional societies the sense of limits (cosmological, religious, traditional and moral, and ecological) preceded and was more important than that of self-limitation, on the contrary the possibility of self-limitation that arises alongside democracy corresponds to the disappearance of the awareness of limits external to human will. In this sense democracy is in reality the political regime most exposed to what the ancient Greeks termed *hybris*, that is unbounded presumption, or an excess of human arrogance. The democratic affirmation of individual freedom is paid for with blindness towards the consequences of individual choices viewed in a wider spatial or temporal perspective. The path towards facing today's challenges passes through a profound social and political reflection on the theme of limits.

As Serge Latouche writes “the path of degrowth is the path of free criticism. It is the path of self-limitation not of the unchecked unleashing of sad passions. Degrowth seeks to resume the programme of the political emancipation of modernity, confronting the difficulties brought about by its realisation. The experience of the transcendence of man within the man that permits him to escape the aporia of egalitarianism” [15].

If, in the future, democracies were to fail in some way, they would disappear not because of external threats but because they were unable to solve their own fundamental paradox. The *paradox of democratic freedom* is that of a regime that has no limits outside itself, with respect to which we are called on to use our own freedom to affirm the limits to that very freedom in the most radical way.

From this point of view the proposal of degrowth is not a limitation of democracy. On the contrary, it is the way to lead democracy back to its roots, but with an altered sense of self. It would imply a key passage in terms of epistemology and political theory. It is not a matter of reintroducing neither an appeal to something superior and *external* to democracy (not god, not nature), nor to introduce some voluntary *internal* limit in terms of ordinary laws or regulations. The task is rather to rethink democracy as something that does not and cannot exist in the abstract and that can only be thought in space and time. In other words, it is to incorporate in the self-perception of democracy the sense of our nature, in a political but also in a social and ecological dimension. Democracy lives, regenerates and is perpetuated only through the recognition and the care of its links with the environment and the past and future generations. A democracy that wishes to respond to social and ecological challenges is obliged to place limits on growth and take responsibility for the future. To rethink democracy with a view to degrowth means affirming that a truly democratic system does not degrade living conditions nor, therefore, deprive future generations the same possibilities of choice and political freedom we have today [16]. Otherwise it would deny itself.

### 3. Scenarios of democratic regeneration

Since I have sought to argue that democratic theory and the development of democratic regimes are closely intertwined with a logic of constant growth, it is necessary to ask ourselves how degrowth transition is possible today. A process that requires a reduction in material flows, economic production, consumption and financial wealth. Nevertheless, I suggest that the idea of degrowth can be understood not as a linear regression, but as an operation in the selective reduction of complexity. This is not about simply presupposing an indiscriminate return to a more simple phase of social organisation – a sort of return to the past – but about searching for a superior or finer ability to discriminate between what is more important and meaningful and what we can instead do without. In other words, it is about a process that mixes forms of conservation, abandonment and innovation in all fields: environmental, cultural, political, economic, technological and others.

To rethink democracy from the point of view of degrowth thus means introducing radical changes in institutional forms and practices that will stimulate citizens and the organs of government to reinforce sensitivity towards essential issues and to develop considered reflections that regard the whole community in a wider spatial and temporal sense. In the following I will attempt to list what seem to me to be the most promising possible paths and scenarios.

#### 3.1. *Paideia*

A first path places the theme of self-education and citizen training at its centre. As Cornelius Castoriadis has underlined, a democratic society should be conceived of as a single, gigantic pedagogic institution in which the continuous self-education of citizens takes place [17]. In other words, the task of a democratic regime is not only that of counting heads, but also of shaping citizens according to a common social ethos. In this direction, the instruments, spaces and conditions for the emergence of a new democratic ethos inspired by the principles of degrowth and sustainability must be considered. It is clear that this perspective clashes head on with the current tendencies of the education system, which lean towards the promotion of those technical–scientific–managerial subjects geared to the immediate translation of knowledge into economic profit. Obsessed by the growth imperative, the logic and structure of education is also being bent to logics of monetary gain and instrumental efficiency, while the critical knowledge and intelligence fundamental not only for confronting contemporary problems and challenges but also for feeding and regenerating the very critical spirit that supports democracy, are left by the wayside [18].

It is therefore fundamental not only to defend a critical foundation and conception of education that is not so strictly utilitarian in its outlook. However, it is also important, beyond this, to foresee the introduction and incentivisation of education on ecological and social limits and sustainability in various educational and training establishments (schools, universities, professional training centres, etc.), supporting both top–down and bottom–up processes. In other words public education programmes of all kinds and at all levels should prioritise the theme of educating the “global citizen”.

From this point of view Edgar Morin has on several occasions pointed to the necessity of a *Cognitive democracy*, that is a democratisation of scientific knowledge that allows citizens to incorporate at least its most fundamental teachings and, in particular, those facts necessary to the development of a global consciousness [19–21]. This objective may be pursued and put into action more successfully if, alongside institutional initiatives, bottom–up (self–)training and educational initiatives also multiply. Associations, networks, and movements create opportunities for training and critical reflection on these themes today. Such initiatives should be supported, widened and rendered more systematic. We may also hypothesise the creation of ad hoc institutions, *super partes*, geared to the collection and diffusion of knowledge on a few themes of crucial importance for our future, such as those linked with ecological and social sustainability. Some, for example, have proposed the institution of an *Academy for the future* [22,23] which could be given the task of carrying out some forms of monitoring, the promotion of scientific knowledge, raising levels of public debate, and informing public authorities, etc.

#### 3.2. *Demos*

A regeneration of democracy also presupposes a rethinking of the idea of *Demos*. If the idea of sovereignty in the traditional view referred to the people, and if, by this, it intended to legitimate the will of the majority of people, today it is necessary to integrate this point of view in both temporal and substantial terms. When Vandana Shiva speaks of “Earth Democracy” [24] she draws on the Indian philosophical concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbkham*, words that in Sanskrit mean “the whole world is one single family”. This “earth family” involves all past, present, and future generations and different forms of life, human and non-human.

The most common objection to this type of reasoning is that future generations, like non-human life forms, cannot really express their points of view. Nevertheless, no matter how much this “impossibility” may merit further discussion, the question posed refers principally to changing the criteria for democratic “rights ownership” rather than the direct “exercise” of such rights. In second place, it appears to me that by going down this road an idea of “duties ownership” is also introduced. Belonging to a common “earth family” brings not only rights and opportunities to present generations, but also responsibilities and duties towards future generations and other living species. In this way, even if animals or future generations have no voice, a principle of relational nature and the nurturing of all living beings that draw sustenance from our planet in a common belonging to the “earth family” is affirmed. In some ways, we do not however define what type of relationship we wish to establish with these subjects even in an evidently asymmetrical dimension.

As far as the recognition of non-human subjects is concerned, a “Great Ape Project”, an international movement calling for the extension of animal rights beginning with our closest relatives, the great primates (chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans, and bonobos) is already active.

Over the last few decades tentative innovations have been made in some countries, including New Zealand, where in 1999 some rights were recognised for five species of monkeys; Germany, where in 2002 an amendment to the constitution introduced a reference to the State’s obligation to respect and protect the dignity of human beings and animals; and Spain, where in 2008 a parliamentary committee proposed some resolutions on the rights of great apes. Also the new constitutions of Ecuador, which came into force in October 2008, and of Bolivia, which came into force in February 2009. In the preamble to the Ecuadorian constitution, the people idealistically recall the celebration of nature, of the “Pacha Mama”. The entire seventh chapter of the constitution is dedicated to the “rights of nature”. The Bolivian constitution also recalls Pacha Mama and the principle of good living or the good life.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the change of the demos can also be posed in terms of possible revisions or experiments in *Intergenerational democracy* [13,28–30]. The idea of a possible intergenerational democracy can be understood in highly different ways according to whether a relationship between coexisting and contiguous generations in the present or a relationship between different generations separated by time is being referred to. In the first instance the incorporation of the rights or needs of future generations recalls the theme of participation among diverse age groups in the population. Davies, for example, defines this “as a method of social engagement and capacity building, requiring the inclusion of citizens representing all age groups within a specific community. It aims to assist the reconstruction of generational and environmental relationships by engaging whole communities, from children to the elderly, in planning and managing their futures” [29].

On the other hand, we have the problem of responsibility among generations separated by long stretches of times. As Barry Holden has noted, the future population can be conceived of as part of the “people” of a democracy. Certainly, the more we think of people separated from us by entire centuries or millennia, the more difficult it is to discourse on what their wishes or desires would be. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot recognize the duties owed to them, both positive (for example, maintaining a healthy environment and a certain balance in ecological resources) and negative (for example not dumping large quantities of toxic, polluting or radioactive waste that will create serious problems for the health of future communities). As regards the field of projects, it is possible to imagine concrete initiatives devoted to future generations. In this direction, it would be possible to finance funds and projects for the conservation of biodiversity, with a particular attention to the agricultural and the animal one, promoting ecological reserves and botanical gardens, reforestation projects, conservation farms and biological reproduction, seed banks. It might also imply the promotion of the millennium libraries and memorials for the preservation of knowledge, languages and techniques on large time spans.

### 3.3. Procedural rights

The transformation of present day democracies into sustainable democracies can also be pursued through the introduction of new procedural rights. These types of rights are becoming fundamental, especially in terms of preventing or controlling large-scale interventions such as construction or infrastructure projects, large-scale plans for exploiting resources, or industrial developments that have far-reaching environmental and social impacts, modifying the conditions of ecosystems, living conditions, and possibilities for work and sustenance in a region. In these cases, the organs of government or local administrations proceed in practice by deciding on and beginning works in the name of the “higher good” of a collective they presume to know better than the communities themselves. Often, there is no obligation to consult local communities and the population, or where this is foreseen they are empty and formal exercises with no real possibility to alter the projects. In procedural terms, laws could foresee that, in case of any intervention with a significant environmental, social and urban impact, the authorities be obliged to first present the project publicly to the communities affected, guaranteeing the activation of participatory assemblies dedicated to deeper discussions, debate and deliberation on such projects or possible alternatives. Via this path we may end by foreseeing a right of recourse to independent authorities for a certain number of citizens against activities by public or private subjects they judge to be seriously damaging to the environmental, monumental or social heritage of a territory. The perspective of procedural rights should not avoid including the implications of Post Normal Science, that is that when “facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent” [31] there must be an “extended peer community” consisting of all those affected by an issue who needs to be involved in the discussion. Under post-normal conditions, citizens can participate in science in many ways [32].

### 3.4. Participative and collaborative practices

One of the crucial problems of historical democracies is the diminution of participation among citizens, both in traditional organisational forms and, above all, as regards participation in elections. Citizens feel ever more impotent and distant from political institutions. In almost all countries with a democratic tradition, trust in politicians and institutions have seen a net decline in recent decades [33–35]. This distrust often translates into apathy, passivity, and forms of delegation. This is

<sup>1</sup> For a deeper discussion on the rights of Nature see, among others, the volume edited by Acosta and Martinez [25] and the works of Giuseppe De Marzo [26] and Hayward [27].

instead a problem that should be carefully considered and approached seriously. As Cornelius Castoriadis has underlined, “the desire and capacity of citizens to participate in political activities are both political problems and competences” [36]. The question of the extension and quality of participation must therefore be viewed as a real test case for a project of democratic regeneration.

One of the first aspects that must be considered in a perspective of degrowth is that of the costs of participation. In modern democratic systems candidacy and thus entrance into the possible government organs of a territory or nation are ever more conditioned by the capacity to invest or gather private finances. The United States provides an example of what the result can be in a political system ever more conditioned by the capacity to attract private finance and invest in political and media marketing. For example, in the presidential elections of 2008 the defeated McCain collected \$383,913,834 (spending \$379,006,485) while the victorious Barack Obama collected the record sum of \$778,642,055 (spending \$760,369,688) [37]. All in all the 2008 presidential elections were the most costly in American history. The overall spending by candidates, political parties and interest groups reached a figure of nearly \$5.3 billion. If we compare the total costs of presidential electoral cycles, their evolution is impressive. They move from \$3,082,340,937 in 2000, to \$4,147,304,003 in 2004, to \$5,285,680,883 in 2008. Between 2004 and 2008 alone there was an increase of 27% [38]. The increase in electoral costs at all levels of politics tells us different things. First, it tells us how political careers are ever more reserved for those who dispose of personal financial means or those who demonstrate a strong ability to attract private funding. In this type of competition where the bar is continuously raised, there is a strong risk that whomsoever is richest, or can rely on support from the strongest economic actors, or even whomsoever is most reckless in terms of accepting contributions from any source, will be favoured. In fact, in a perspective of “exchange” many firms or private subjects “buy” preferential treatment in their relations with the administration by generously financing the electoral campaigns of this or that candidate. To confront these risks, rigorous regulation and checks on political and electoral spending are necessary. A cap must be set on costs in order to moderate the race to spend more and more and to allow all to participate with equal chances. In addition, it will be necessary to place strong limits on the size of private contributions so that no person can reach a strategic position triggering implicit forms of exchange.

A second crucial aspect regards citizen participation outside the traditional system of representation. In the political literature on democracy, the idea of representative and that of direct democracy have always been conceived as opposed to one another. In reality what has been seen in many experiences of participatory democracy or participatory budgets is a process of continuous regulated interaction between citizens and representatives. On this subject we may speak of *co-management*, or better *co-piloting*. This last category resumes not only the idea of sharing administration and possible choices between existing alternatives, but also the possibility of choosing between wider plans, and through this establishing a general direction towards which to work.

On the other hand, this type of transformation also allows an emphasis to be placed on the deliberative process rather than the simple counting of votes. The individuation of a practice that includes gathering information, meetings between different experts, simulations, the definition of priorities and the construction of shared proposals can help to contain purely individualistic interests by supporting the emergence of more complex and advanced views and opposing competitive logics with efficiency and the advantage of collaborative logics in obtaining the best result, even at the individual level. The important dimension of these processes of deliberative democracy is represented by the fact that they presuppose that the discursive process can determine more elaborated forms of understanding, new values and even the reconsideration of his own interests. This is what Norgaard defined as a “shared learning process” [39].

### 3.5. Commons, local communities and trusts

An important horizon in the redefinition of the democratic system with a view to degrowth is that of commons or common goods [40–42]. When thinking of common goods, not only is the dominant conception of possession and private property put into question, but also is the more general idea of democracy and the relationship between a democratic community and its territory. The idea of commons moves beyond the traditional opposition between private and public property. Common goods recall instead intertwined relationships of responsibility and solidarity between single citizens and the collective, between present, past and future generations, between human beings and ecosystems. A community recognises its common goods and recognises itself through its common goods. The perspective of a struggle for the extension of the recognition of commons – from natural springs, rivers and lakes, forests and coastlines, from monumental heritage to the internet, etc., leads not to the elimination of the market and mercantilist logics, but to their strong limitation as concerns the fundamental goods of the collective. As Paolo Cacciari writes, “If we were to depart not from monetary accumulation, but from the necessity to preserve common goods for as long as possible and in the best condition, the developmental dogma would collapse immediately” [43]. The forms that the recognition of commons can take are different: from the legal institution of local communities, to trusts, to hybrid models or public–private partnerships. Recalling an idea of participation and responsibility in the management of resources wider than that to which we are used, the idea of a “democracy of common goods” or “Earth democracy” thus moves forward [24,44].

### 3.6. Constitutions and institutional invention

A project of democratic regeneration also requires the profound transformation of fundamental institutional rules and forms. As Eckersley has noted, “One of the aims of green constitutional design should be to facilitate a robust ‘green public

sphere' by providing fulsome environmental information and the mechanisms for contestation, participation, and access to environmental justice" [45]. An interesting example comes from the Bolivian and Ecuadorian cases we have already seen.

Also in Europe, the unsticking of politics and civil society must be approached through the invention and experimentation of new democratic institutions and through a constitutional process that sanctions changes to the founding rules of the political community. Now, as Rokkan has argued, the European political systems came about through building around four fundamental cleavages. The first two, the central/periphery opposition and the state/church opposition were born of processes of national unification, and the other two, the country/city and capital/workers oppositions, were born following processes of industrialisation [46,47]. From this point of view the opposition between growth and degrowth, as well as that posed by the ecology movement between consumption and sustainability, that posed by the anti-globalisation movement between the global and the local, and that posed by the feminist movement between production and reproduction are in a nutshell new cleavages that cut diagonally through the four historical cleavages upon which democratic political systems are structured. In other words these instances are unlikely to be simply picked up by political forces already incorporated into existing institutions, since they came about in response to other questions and conflicts. It is more likely that they will require a reconfiguration of the political and institutional system.

Instances of degrowth, sustainability, relocalisation, and reproduction are in other words bearers of other value, spatial and temporal logics, and require a regeneration of the very same fundamental democratic institutions. These new institutions should incorporate in their very forms a method of organising and functioning for a different democratic logic tuned to new spatial, temporal and value dimensions.

From a territorial point of view legislative and deliberative assemblies fundamentally follow a rigid geographical and hierarchic (multi-scale) administrative distribution. For example, municipalities, provinces, regions, states, and nations. However, the tending and protection of ecosystems, like ecological emergencies, only very rarely mirror these sub-divisions. A paradigm change from this point of view would mean promoting a plural, dynamic and flexible idea of political authority, or indeed beginning to conceive of the public sphere as expressed through a plurality of forums, some stable, some temporary, some formed on an administrative, traditional basis and others of a new type in relation to a more ecologically appropriate territorial levels [48]. This could be a drainage basin, a forest, a mountain chain, a coastal area or a marine ecosystem. For each of these more significant contexts we must foresee a forum of control, discussion, comparison and also deliberation. It is clear that this prospect should not be understood as the substitution of administrative regions born from historical political-cultural processes with what have been called "bioregions" or, on the other side, the overthrow of state forms in favour of a fictional and menacing "global government". The creation and experimentation of ad hoc institutions to which a part of the responsibility in the management of wider commons is conferred or alienated is more interesting. These would be true transregional or transnational spaces that will help us to "relativise" historical identity belongings and parochial logics and to reason in wider ecological terms.

From a temporal point of view, we can also think of institutions that incorporate wider temporal perspectives into their organisational and procedural logics. From this point of view some have proposed to institute a senate – or higher chamber – dedicated to long-term ecological challenges [49]. This new "ecological" high chamber would be concretely designed to analyse, discuss and define the frameworks or directives for the long term, or to control and eventually block (veto power) government decisions and those of the lower chamber that represent an advantage for current generations but at the same time a threat or heavy burden for future generations. Issues such as perspectives and investments in energy, conservation and natural heritage policies, migration policies, the reorientation of production policies or the evolution of urban and agricultural seats, would find their first prospective definition in this higher chamber, while legislative initiatives and government action would remain with the lower chamber and the government. The organisational logic that to preside in this new chamber should be coherent with its objectives. For example the mandates of those elected could be a little longer in temporal terms, yet successive mandates would not be allowed in order that those elected concentrate on their own tasks and not on the possibility of being re-elected through mechanisms of exchange or favouritism. To favour attention to future generations the traditional logic of higher chambers, usually geared towards the oldest members of society could be overturned, and a wider component of young members favoured instead. In this way it may be hypothesised that choices would be made by people with a greater interest in conserving the best conditions for generations to come, starting with their children and grandchildren.

#### 4. Conclusion

At the end of this excursus it seems clear the democracy and degrowth are not immediately superimposable or summable projects, but they are perspectives which can fruitfully intersect to reflect risks, limits and contradictions of each from a perspective of mutual re-establishment. While a perspective of material degrowth is possible even in an authoritative manner, a political philosophy of degrowth requires a more coherent reflection on a change of the ideas of well-being or *buen vivir*, on the transformation of the economic rules and on the renewal of the institutions of democracy. On the one hand, degrowth needs to be thought in a change which is not the result of a centralized planning, but of a broad and articulated process of shared learning, self-education, reconstruction of social ties and collective transformation, and this is guaranteed only through a democratic participatory and discursive process. On the other hand, the perspective of degrowth represents for the democratic project the possibility of returning to its own roots and to rethink the epistemological and theoretical foundations of democracy, so as to ensure its sustainability and reproducibility over time and space.



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