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Can the Left Escape Economism?*

Serge Latouche[†]

Let us say it more clearly again: the price of freedom is the destruction of the economic as the central and, in fact, single foundation of VALUE/worth. Is that such a high price to pay? To me it certainly is not. I infinitely prefer having a new friend to a new car. This is undoubtedly a subjective preference, but is it so “objectively”? I leave gladly to political philosophers the task of “establishing” (pseudo-)consumption as a supreme principle. (Castoriadis 2010)

To exit from the impasse of a growth society involves finding ways of building an alternative world of voluntary sobriety and frugal abundance, a world we believe possible. But to do this also implies abandoning the well-trodden paths of “critical” thought, the inherited ways of thinking that are fundamentally responsible for all the facets of the Left. Inventing new ways of doing politics is to rethink the political as such and to find a way out of the impasse of politicking. One of the (and possibly the principal) reasons for the failure of socialism is traceable to the hegemonic will of a single discourse and model. Not that there have not been few: Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, Trotskyism and social democracies. Each of these currents of thought and modelling have been incapable of welcoming a plurality of truth and a diversity of concrete solutions. To be sure, Marx, in his famous 1881 letter to Vera Zasulich, had pointed to the possibility of a direct passage to socialism from a traditional Russian peasant community, the Mir, thus bypassing the capitalist stage. The possibility of a different path, taken up by post-independence African countries, has been raised again by the Zapatista and indigenous communities of Mexico (Belloncle 1982; Baschet 2005).

Nevertheless, ten years after Marx’s death, Engels was much more skeptical on the subject and, twenty years later Lenin attacked both theoretically and practically these “survivals,” which Stalin subsequently liquidated without mercy. The presently prevailing Marxisms of the Third World have not been any easier on pre-capitalist community structures. “Socialist” modernization has razed the past to the ground with more violence and vehemence than capitalistic modernization, paving the way for ultra-liberal globalization, subsequent and consequent to the failures of socialist experiences. The extraordinary diversity of socialistic voices (too rapidly dismissed as romantic or utopian) was effectively reduced to the monolithic approach of historical materialism, both dialectical and scientific. Since then, tolerance for plurality has

*This is a translation of Latouche, S. 2010. *La Gauche peut-elle sortir de l'économisme? La Décroissance* 70: 5.

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been no more than a temporizing tactic, a provisional concession against a background of intolerance.

The aim of the movement for “degrowth” is precisely to let other voices be heard again and to open up alternative paths. Though I believe degrowth is the only political project capable of renewing the Left, it meets with vociferous and recurring resistance.

A Self-Evident Truth

Degrowth is a project of the political Left because it is founded on a radical critique of liberalism. It is linked to the original inspiration of socialism in that it denounces industrialization and questions capitalism in conformity to orthodox Marxism. First, degrowth is quite obviously a radical critique of liberalism, which is understood as all the values that underlie consumer society. Re-valuation and redistribution—two of the eight R’s in the political project of a concrete utopia for degrowth—give this critique particular consistency (the eight R’s are re-valuate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, re-use, and recycle). To re-value means effectively to reassess all the principles in which we believe, on which we base and organize our lives; it demands renouncing principles that lead to disaster. Altruism must take precedence over egoism, cooperation over unbridled competition, the importance of social life over unlimited consumption, the local over the global, autonomy over heteronomy, the reasonable over the rationalistic, the relational over the material, etc. Above all, it means questioning the Prometheism of that Modernity associated with Descartes (humanity as master and lord of Nature) or Bacon (subjugate Nature). Simply put, degrowth amounts to a paradigm shift.

By redistribution one intends sharing wealth and access to the natural resources between North and South as well as within each society. Sharing wealth is the normal solution to social problems. It is because sharing is a cardinal ethical principle of the Left that the capitalist mode of production—which is founded on the inequality of access to the means of production and always engenders more inequalities—must be abolished..

Second, degrowth has affinity with the first inspiration of socialism, as it was pursued by independent thinkers such as Elisée Reclus and Paul Lafargue. Thanks to inspirational figures of the likes of Jacques Ellul and Ivan Illich, degrowth rediscovers the trenchant critiques of the anti-industrialization precursors of socialism. A re-reading of a pioneer such as William Morris, in light of a reassessment of Luddism, gives meaning to the kind of political ecology developed by André Gorz and Bernard Charbonneau.

Third, as a radical critique of consumer society and development, degrowth is *ipso facto* a critique of capitalism. This is not so much because it denounces

capitalism's ecological limits and social contradictions, but first and foremost because its realization is conditioned by a radical questioning of the "spirit" of capitalism (as Max Weber understood the term). Paradoxically, degrowth could be (re)presented as a radically Marxist project, a project to which Marxism (and maybe Marx himself) would perhaps not have betrayed. Growth is basically the "vulgar" name for what Marx analyzed as the endless accumulation of capital, the source of all the dead-ends and injustices of capitalism. Everything, or almost, can be found in Marx's famous, oft-cited and commented (and ultimately rejected) formula of the Temple's guardians: "Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the Prophets!" We are here referring to the debate occasioned by the work of Beitone and Marion (2009). "The essence of Capitalism," Beitone and Marion justly emphasize, "resides in the accumulation of capital made possible through the extortion of surplus-value from employees." They add in a note that

Extracting enough profit is a condition for accumulation that has no other end than the realization of still higher profits. This logic is imposed on individual capitalists, and those intent on adopting another logic are eliminated through competition among capitalists, as Marx had already underlined.

Perfect! Except that the highest profit has to be accumulated in turn. If it is well to say that growth or accumulation of capital is the essence of capitalism, its final objective can also be said to be founded on the search for profit. Ends and means here are interchangeable. Profit is the objective of the accumulation of capital as capital accumulation is the objective of profit. To speak therefore of *good* growth or of *good* capital accumulation, of *good* development, such as, for instance, a mythical "growth in the service of better satisfaction of social needs," as Beitone and Marion would have it (2009, 6), is like saying that there is a *good* capitalism characterized by *good* (or *green* or *sustainable*) exploitation of nature. Our authors continue, stating that

To respond to a crisis that is inextricably ecological and social, one has to escape this endless logic of capital accumulation, the subordination of the essential to decisions predicated on the logic of profit. This point does not make for debate here, but does it mean that we must adhere to the degrowth thesis?

The answer to their question should be "Without any doubt" and not, as the authors state, "Probably not."

And Yet. . .

Anathematizing quibbles over the term degrowth frequently hides the Left's resistance, in the psychoanalytical sense of the term, to the project itself. But what's in a word? What degrowth evokes is ambivalent, as is the case with other blanket

terms such as progress, growth, development and especially sustainable development. Degrowth is seen as negative, something unpardonable in a society where at all costs one must “think positively” (but why should those who want to change society submit themselves to the dictatorship of that society’s perverse ideology?). Degrowth, it is said, will never be *sexy*. All this is not false, and I would even be tempted to say that one could hardly find a more inadequate term to describe a project positively intent on ecological democracy and frugal abundance. When all is said and done, degrowth is no more than a heuristically activating slogan. There is also a problem of translation. In more Latin-based tongues, “*la décroissance*” (French) or “*la decrescita*” (in Italian) sounds far less rhetorically strange and much more positive than the English equivalent. What could be more fortunate than the fact that after a disastrous flood, a river returns to its normal flow? Economy has overflowed its bounds, so is it not time it was put back into its rightful place? For this downsizing to take place, there must be degrowth.

In reality, this allergic reaction to degrowth among the Greens or the radical Left is based on a misunderstanding of what it means to “escape from the economy” and stems from a visceral refusal to give up productivism. Degrowth’s attack on productivism, propounding a society of sobriety, viewing crisis as opportunity at first sight can only appear as provocations prone “to make Billancourt despair,”¹ even if this factory, a working-class symbol, thanks to the delocalizing productivism of capitalism, no longer exists! Reactions in the face of crisis are symptomatic: either we revive the planet-destroying mega-machine or we invent another society. The project of degrowth elaborated by the “objectors to growth” is radically other. It is not about substituting a “good economy”—*good* growth or *good* development for a bad one—repainting it green, making it slightly more social, or less inequitable, thanks to a better dose of state regulation or a hybridized economy via the logic of the gift and solidarity. It is about *exiting* the economy. This phrase is generally misunderstood because it is difficult for our contemporaries to become conscious of the fact that the economy is a religion. To be more rigorously exact, we should speak about degrowth as “a-growth” in the same way as we speak about a-theism. Objectors to growth are “atheists” in matters of growth and the economy. Of course, as all human societies must, a degrowth society must organize the production of its survival. Like any other species, humans are in a metabolic relationship with nature. For all that, I know of no political economy of amoebas or chestnuts! To build a sustainable future, we have to use environmental resources reasonably, consuming raw materials and services as Stone Age societies of abundance once did (Sahlins 1976)—as cultures that have never entertained the notion of economics. Degrowth society cannot emerge from the iron corset of scarcity, needs, economic calculation, and *homo economicus*. These imaginary foundations of the economy must be questioned again. A rediscovered

¹Sartre used the expression *désespérer Billancourt* to deride the French Communist Party tactic of not telling workers the entire truth lest it provoke demoralization. Billancourt, a metaphor for workers, was a Renault factory with some of the largest concentrations of workers in 1950s France.

frugality enables the reconstruction of a society of abundance on the basis of what Ivan Illich called “modern subsistence.” That is,

a way of life in a post-industrial economy within which people have succeeded in reducing their market dependence and have thereby enriched themselves, protecting—by political means—an infrastructure within which techniques and tools serve first and foremost the creation of unquantified and unquantifiable use-values by the professional producers of needs (Illich 1977, 87–88).

(Translated by Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro and Michael Singleton)

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