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# Towards a fair degrowth-society: Justice and the right to a ‘good life’ beyond growth

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## ABSTRACT

A critical scrutiny is presented of the ethical assumptions of growth and degrowth theories with respect to distributive justice and the normative conditions for a ‘good human life’. An argument is made in favor of Sen’s and Nussbaum’s ‘capabilities approach’ as the most suitable theoretical framework for addressing these questions. Since industrialization economic growth has played a key-role as an attraction pole, around which issues of social justice, political stability, and welfare protection seemed to gravitate. Accordingly, it is considered as a necessary condition for both intragenerational and intergenerational justice. These assumptions have been subjected to substantial critique by degrowth-thinkers, according to which economic growth is rather a threat than a condition for intragenerational and intergenerational justice. However, a theoretical underpinning of these assumptions is missing so far. In the paper I analyze the ethical and moral assumptions in both approaches by focusing on the theories of justice that are implicitly laid down as a background for their arguments (welfarism, resourcism, and the capabilities-approach). In a detailed analysis of the main critical points formulated by degrowth advocates I take the capabilities approach perspective and show why it can offer a more adequate normative underpinning for the conceptualization of a degrowth society.

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## 1. Introduction

Advocates of growth have been repeating for years the mantra that economic growth is the best ally for distributive justice and a necessary condition for a high quality of life. On the other hand, supporters of the degrowth movement maintain that precisely because of the pervasive growth-diktat the basis of both intra-generational (among people currently living on the planet) and intergenerational justice (towards future generations) has been increasingly eroded in the last decades. Accordingly, they identify in the current crisis of our growth-oriented economies a unique chance for improving social justice and achieving a truly sustainable path with respect to future generations. As Serge Latouche puts it, a declining state is unavoidably coming upon us: ensuring that this process will lead to a more just society with a different imaginary concerning the ideal of a ‘good life’ and not to a catastrophic economic recession with fatal consequences in terms of social costs is the challenging task we are faced with now [1].

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Indeed, in the so-called Global North we are confronted with the pressing question whether growth as we know it (i.e. GDP growth) is still an achievable goal for affluent countries. Given the key role that economic growth has played for decades as an attraction pole, around which issues of social justice, political stability, and welfare protection seemed to gravitate, the rising awareness that this system might no longer work as expected at the same time begets confusion in the old schemes of thought and opens a promising field for a new, creative imaginary that might lead to alternative models for a post-growth society.

In spite of this tight link between economic growth and justice issues, the growth–degrowth debate has been so far dominated by an almost exclusive focus on specific questions concerning alternative measurement indicators for national economies or the implementation of alternative feasible models for post-growth-economies [2,3]. While on the one hand such questions are undoubtedly of crucial relevance, neglecting the ethical perspective might in the long run have fatal consequences.<sup>1</sup>

From a philosophical point of view, as I have shown elsewhere [4,5], in the growth–degrowth debate we are confronted with four basic questions; I limit myself in this paper only to the second and the third ones:

1. Is growth as we know it possible at all under the biophysical conditions of our common planet—in other words, *can* we still grow?
2. Is growth as we know it morally justifiable or is it even morally necessary? Which issues in terms of intragenerational and intergenerational justice are we confronted with on the path towards a post-growth-society? In other words, *may* we still grow?
3. Does growth as a path of development make sense at all? Is it ethically acceptable? Is it something we might reasonably and meaningfully opt for? In other words, do we still *want to* grow? This question addresses the ethical issue about the idea of ‘a good human life’ that people have and whether in the light of practical reasoning the growth path is a desirable and wise option or not, even if it turned out that it presents no problems from a strictly moral point of view.
4. Who is ‘we’? Who has a say in the matter; that is, who is allowed to factually (and not only formally) participate in the discourse? Whose voices and whose perspectives are heard and have the chance of making a difference? This set of questions is at the same time epistemological (which scientific approach, which theories, which models are considered in the discourse?) and ethical (who is excluded?<sup>2</sup> Where are the voices of the so-called Global South and of non-human species?, etc.).

## 2. Frame of the discourse: justice and the good life

Both advocates of growth and of degrowth claim that their option is crucial for the sake of justice. These claims need further investigation. In the following sections I will first present the three main current theoretical approaches on distributive justice (welfarism, resourcism, and the capabilities approach). I will then briefly outline the claims for justice held by advocates of economic growth (Section 3.1). Finally, I will present the critique advanced by degrowth thinkers against such claims and subject this critique to a detailed scrutiny from the point of view of the capabilities approach (Sections 3.2–3.4).

### 2.1. Distributive justice: current approaches

By addressing the question of justice related to the issue of growth/degrowth we have to consider three ethical issues. First, we have to ask to whom we have duties of justice, i.e. who possesses distributive entitlements. Second, we have to ask about the ‘currency of justice’ (such as resources, welfare, or capabilities) that is adopted in order to identify which entitlements we are talking about. Third, we have to decide according to which ‘pattern of justice’ (such as equality, priority, or sufficiency) entitlements should be distributed [6].

The first question has been widely addressed with regards to future generations especially within the sustainability debate. In fact, the core of the idea of ‘Sustainability’ consists in the issue of intra- and intergenerational distributive justice and encompasses duties towards currently living generations and future generations regarding different goods [7] and types of capital, with a special focus on natural resources [8,9]. If ethical questions of intergenerational duties are discussed, it has to be justified first that duties towards future generations exist at all. Neither Parfit’s “Non-Identity-Problem” nor the argument claiming that future persons cannot have rights today are convincing [10]. Parfit’s Non-Identity-Problem obtains its moral relevance by confusing the terms individuality and personality.<sup>3</sup> However, moral duties mainly apply to personality

<sup>1</sup> The newly appointed German “Enquete Commission Growth, Welfare, Quality of Life—Paths towards sustainable economy and social advancement within a social market economy” counts 17 members of the Parliament and 17 experts, among which no one stands for expertise in ethical or justice-related issues.

<sup>2</sup> The just mentioned German Commission did not appoint any woman at all among the experts although many German female scholars have been researching for years on issues related to alternative welfare models and quality of life!

<sup>3</sup> While personality implies a normative status, individuality refers to the contingent characteristics of a single human being resulting from her unique and non-interchangeable life story [11].

and less to individuality. Thus, regardless of the specific individual identity that members of future generation will embody they will still be ‘persons’ in a normative sense and therefore have entitlements [11].<sup>4</sup>

The question about the patterns of distribution is strictly dependent on the currency, i.e. the specification of what people are entitled to. Hence, I will limit myself to a brief overview of the second question (“currency of justice”) here and leave the third one (“pattern of justice”) out. In the current discourse about the currency of justice one can identify three main positions: welfarism, resourcism, and the capabilities-approach.

### 2.1.1. Welfarism

According to Welfarism, which relies on utilitarian ethics,<sup>5</sup> satisfying welfare – defined as the function of a person’s desires (or preferences) – is the only value that ultimately counts for its own sake. Accordingly, issues of justice concern the welfare or well-being of individuals. Welfare refers to utility as it is subjectively perceived by individuals and is typically identified with individual happiness [15,p. 277].

According to Welfarism distributive justice rather than concerning a certain set of goods (material or immaterial) to which individuals are entitled, considers the pleasure or happiness that these commodities provide to the subjects who use them. Accordingly, income and wealth in general count only insofar as they provide pleasure and utility. Utility functions of different individuals can be aggregated to a total unit,<sup>6</sup> as it is the case with indicators like the national happiness index. Happiness indices rely on self-reported accounts of happiness and are strictly linked to subjective perceptions of well-being.

According to Layard happiness is the ultimate goal of human action because it is a self-evident good while income or commodities are means to this goal [18]. Accordingly, he pleads for a shift from standard of living to quality of life measured in terms of happiness [19]. Moreover, Layard assumes that humans tend to a maximization of happiness, which should also be the goal of a nation’s economy [18].

In the degrowth-debate happiness research plays a major role because it enables decoupling subjective happiness from income and wealth and delivers arguments against the diktat of economic growth in terms of GDP as a necessary condition for happiness [2,20]. This seems at a first glance to be a feasible alternative to GDP because it is still ‘measurable’ and homogenizable. However, by following the happiness path one has to buy into ethical and anthropological assumptions, which might be problematic. In fact, happiness and quality of life are not synonymous. Happiness is widely influenced by attitudes, mental dispositions, education and what Sen and Nussbaum call the adaptive phenomenon due to which especially poor or disadvantaged people tend to adjust to their unfavorable circumstances and to make life bearable in order to cope with daily adversities [15,21]. If we limit ourselves to assess self-reported happiness we miss essential aspects of justice. As Sen has shown with respect to self-reported health in the Indian regions of Bihar and Kerala, the objectively healthy state was subjectively health-poor and vice versa, because in Bihar people had less ability to assess their own health situation and had less hope to do anything about it [22]. Moreover, since what counts is a self-reported state of happiness, what leads to it can be arbitrary: there is no way of expressing a judgment about what makes people happy and why, even if it is something morally objectionable. This problem has been acknowledged within the Utilitarian discourse as well. Accordingly, rule utilitarianism invokes the principle of utility in a fictive procedure of deciding according to which rules individuals want to live together in a society. This shifts the role of the utility principle to the meta-level of moral rules of behavior. Moral judgements are thus explained in terms of rational (intended as instrumental rationality) judgements led by utility maximization under the ideal condition of complete information, comparability, and equal probability to be in any possible social position.<sup>7</sup>

Sen questions the assumption that happiness is the final goal and only intrinsic value of human action. In fact, people can decide to act according to other motives (altruism, care, and the like) against their personal happiness or advantage. When

<sup>4</sup> Addressing the question, whether nonhuman natural entities also have entitlements in terms of justice, would go beyond the scope of this paper. This issue is known in Environmental Ethics as ‘Demarcation Problem’ and encompasses different solutions regarding the moral status of nonhuman entities (classifiable as: anthropocentrism, pathocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, holism [12]). However, the framework of the Demarcation Problem focuses almost exclusively on the inherent moral value of beings and lacks adequate conceptual tools for considering non-instrumental relations(s) between humans and nonhuman nature. As I have shown elsewhere, a more complex axiology leads to the consideration of nonhuman natural entities no longer in merely instrumental terms, but for their fundamental and eudaimonistic values. Thus, the problematic language of ‘rights’ applied to nonhuman entities can be avoided [13].

<sup>5</sup> It is not so easy to clarify the relation between Utilitarianism and Welfarism, because on the one hand there is no clear-cut definition of Welfarism and on the other hand Utilitarianism is a complex and multifaceted ethical theory. As Keller has pointed out, one can at least refer to three different major theories of welfare: (a) mental states, i.e. subjective experiences; (b) desire or preferences (actual or hypothetical according to Harsanyi’s normative ideal of an impartially sympathetic observer); (c) objective list of material and immaterial goods [14]. In this paragraph I mainly refer to Welfarism in terms of subjectively perceived utility (preferences), hedonistic orientation, and the aggregability of individual functions.

<sup>6</sup> An alternative to an aggregative total sum of individual utility functions is the principle of average utility. According to Harsanyi’s equiprobability model individuals in an ideal situation (analogous to Rawls’s original position), in which they are supposed to decide about the rules for (and the shape of) the society they will enter and have an equal probability to hold any position in it, would rationally decide according to the principle of average utility [16,17].

<sup>7</sup> Harsanyi’s concept relies on the assumption of interpersonal utility comparisons, which he supports by referring to Smith’s theory of sympathy. However, Harsanyi’s attempt to reconcile sympathy and utility under the perspective of the ideal situation of equiprobability, which he considers a modern restatement of Smith’s impartial spectator [17], reduces the sympathy principle to a better informed and more generalized utility principle. Instead, Smith clearly dismisses the utility principle as the basic explanation of human behavior [23]. Far from being a transcendental experiment for isolated individuals, the ‘impartial spectator’ originates from the anthropological necessity of reciprocal recognition and ‘sympathy’, and is the result of a historical and cultural sedimentation of feelings of approbation and disapprobation regarding actions and sentiments.

somebody acts against her personal happiness or utility this might be due to a number of constraints, both internal (psychological and biological) and external (social, institutional and physical) and therefore to a lack of substantial freedom. Yet, this action could also be an expression of substantial freedom, an act of freedom rooted in a reasoned choice and the capabilities to implement it. When focusing on happiness as a measure for well-being we lack sufficient information and instruments to make this fundamental distinction.

With respect to future generations the welfarist approach is even more inadequate. As Page clearly points out, future generations might also adapt their desires in the face of environmental decay and thus “become ‘contented victims’ of climate change” [6, p. 455].<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1.2. *Resourcism*

According to resourcism distributive justice consists in the fair distribution of impersonal resources, such as income and wealth, which are considered the capital sources for well-being and a good life. Usually the theoretical background of resourcism is John Rawls’ theory of justice. According to Rawls ‘social primary goods’ should be distributed *prima facie* equally among the population unless an unequal distribution proves to benefit those who are worst-off.

There is a significant difference between Rawls’ concept of justice and the reduction of wellbeing to income only: social primary goods encompass not only income and wealth but also freedom of movement, freedom of thought and the social bases of self-respect [25]. Moreover, they are under the direct control of mechanisms of social justice, such as social taxation, education and employment, which have to ensure that all citizens have fair and equal chances to access to offices and positions.

Rawls’ main argument against a focus on happiness or on quality of life is that concepts of the good (and therefore of a good life) are plural and it is almost impossible to find a common ground for the definition of what is a good human life. Hence, the main issue of distributive justice is finding a fair distribution of goods and chances that enhances freedom and to leave to individuals the identification of what they call a good life (priority of the right over the good). Any attempt at a definition of the good runs the risk of paternalism with the consequent shrinking of personal liberty. According to resourcism no naïve trust in economic growth as a means to improve people’s well-being is justified, although wellbeing can be best measured by considering commodities as well as chances. Resourcism calls for just institutions, which have the task of distributing wealth and chances among population. Rawls’ difference principle (unequal distribution is morally justifiable only if it is for the advantage of the worst off), however, considers the possibility that inequality might work to a certain extent as a driving factor for economic growth and therefore bring about a benefit for the worst off in society. One problem with this assumption is that there are many degrees of being ‘badly-off’: what if the second and third worst-off are not advantaged by the chosen distribution? How do we identify the threshold of being worst off? What if the advantage for the worst-off is still at a level far below a minimum standard of living/of a good life? [6].

Against Rawls, Sen maintains that resourcism, even though goods are intended in a broad way, is still concerned with good things rather than with what these good things do to human beings [26]. Moreover, it underplays the heterogeneity of human wellbeing and overlooks at least five essential factors to wellbeing: personal heterogeneity (age, pregnancy, bodily structure and disabilities); environmental diversities (climate and geography); institutional variations (conditions for accessing education, etc.); differences in relational perspectives (local customs and cultural patterns concerning for example appearing in public, etc.); distribution within the family [22]. In Nussbaum’s terms resourcism falls short because it fails to take account of the fact that “individuals need differing levels of resources if they are to come up to the same level of capability to function. They also have differing abilities to convert resources into actual functioning” [27, p. 35].

### 2.1.3. *Capabilities approach*

According to the capabilities approach, the currency for distributive justice are ‘capabilities to function’ and the focus lies on people’s substantial freedom to achieve the life that they have reason to value. Functionings are defined by Sen as “the various things a person may value doing or being”, such as being healthy and well-nourished, being safe, being educated, having a good job, being able to have intercourse with loved ones and the like [26, p. 75]. Accordingly, functionings are related to income and goods but only insofar as these factually serve the achievement of functionings: i.e. what counts is what people are actually able to do with them. Capabilities refer instead to the substantial freedom to enjoy the various combinations of functionings that the person can achieve.

The core of the capabilities approach is Sen’s phrase ‘value and have reason to value’, because this marks a significant difference from the welfarist and resourcist approaches. Primary goods are valuable only if people value them and not as such: even Rawls’ theory of fairness cannot do without assumptions of what is good and what is valuable. However, subjective valuation in terms of preferences is not an alternative either: while according to the utilitarian background of welfare economics individual preferences are taken as they are – no reason, i.e. no justification, has to be given to others –, Sen claims the necessity of giving an account for what we value. Moreover, in the utilitarian approach value is a function of utility and happiness, which are the ultimate goal; accordingly, valuation is an activity of instrumental rationality (calculus of the most efficient means) and is oriented towards maximization of what one wants [15, p. 175 ff.]. On the contrary, for Sen, people value functionings intrinsically; moreover, the reasons for valuing them cannot be reduced to a homogeneous unit like utility but are multifaceted and plural. There is a categorical difference between what it is rational to choose in terms of

<sup>8</sup> For an attempt to develop a theory of intergenerational justice on the ground of utilitarian ethics see Birnbacher [24]

welfare economics (i.e. what maximizes one's own utility) and what one has good reasons to choose, which implies a thorough critical scrutiny of one's own motives and implications in the face of others [15,p. 181]: "rationality is primarily a matter of basing – explicitly or by implication – our choices on reasoning that we can reflectively sustain, and it demands that our choices, as well as our actions and objectives, values and priorities, can survive our own seriously undertaken critical scrutiny" [15,p. 194]. Scrutiny does not take place from an abstract or a transcendental point of view, disembodied from particular perspectives. Rather, by referring to Smith's concept of the impartial spectator as somebody who is not directly involved in a state of affairs but is not detached either (she feels sympathetic with those who are directly involved and can make a judgment on the situation), Sen develops a concept of embodied impartiality as the guide for critical scrutiny of valuations and actions. Accordingly, there can be a plurality of impartial reasons, which might be all defensible in a deliberative setting.

The concept of the good and of a good life is neither something given (or even implemented by a board of experts, by the administrators or by activists and NGOs) nor does it correspond to merely individual preferences. Rather, it is the object of democratic processes of deliberation and critical scrutiny, which do not only involve 'stakeholders', but also spectators from other positional perspectives. The capabilities approach raises also the issue of what process, group, philosophical structure or institution has the legitimate authority to decide what people have reason to value [22] and directs the attention to the substantial conditions for participation, including domination structures, actual access conditions, and effective 'power' of being heard and making a difference.

Institutions play a major role for enabling substantial freedom: according to Nussbaum they are not only responsible for a fair distribution of resources, but also for the totality of capabilities and functionings that people can achieve. Their role is to provide the substantial conditions for functionings and not to foster the actual achievement of certain functionings. This way, she claims, paternalistic conceptions of State intervention are excluded. Moreover, "capability justice must be developed in a way that is tolerant and respectful of the choices people make and the diverging conceptions of the good life they possess" [28,p. 53 ff.] without imposing a specific conception of the good life upon them.

However, Nussbaum departs from Sen in proposing a list of basic capabilities on the ground of what one can reasonably consider the basic elements of a good human life. Her understanding of a good human life is not hedonic. Rather, it relates to the whole life as a 'blessed' life (*eudaimonia*) and relies on the anthropological assumption of humans as fundamentally social beings. Accordingly, a human life cannot be considered full and dignified if it lacks certain basic capabilities to function ([6,p. 463]; for the list of capabilities see [21]).

Such a concept of the good life does not overlap with self-reported happiness since it claims a certain level of 'objectivity': regardless of what people actually feel about their condition, lacking one or more of the basic capabilities is an issue of justice.

Far from replacing Sen's claim for public debate Nussbaum's perspective offers a platform for discussion, in which a 'vague and thick conception of the good life' is proposed to a wide range of context-sensitive concretizations. However, as Page rightly notes, "consumption patterns and lifestyles which harm the central functioning capabilities of others" are most likely incompatible with this understanding [6,p. 466].

With respect to intergenerational justice Page adds to Nussbaum's list one further capability, which is crucial in the face of climate change: 'ecological functioning capability',<sup>9</sup> which he defines as the capability to experience life in an environment devoid of dangerous environmental impacts such as those associated with climate change.

Similarly, Ott and Döring argue at least for a strong and demanding absolute standard for future generations and suggest replacing the "(basic) need" approach with Nussbaum's list of capabilities [8]. Thus, the minimum standard is set at a much higher level so as to include all necessary conditions to accomplish a good life, i.e. a life worthy of a human being.

As to the specific question whether economic growth is a condition or a threat for justice the HDCA (Human Development and Capabilities Association) leaves the answer open: economic growth as such is not held to be a driver for justice or injustice; rather, the claims for (if not assumptions of) justice advanced by growth advocates have to undergo a critical scrutiny of implications, conditions, and consequences of growth with respect to the achievement of functionings and substantial freedoms [22]. It follows that alternatives to economic growth as a means for enabling capabilities and achieving justice must be considered and scrutinized as well.

### 3. Growth, degrowth, and justice

Let me now briefly recall the generally well known reasons why advocates of growth consider it to be a necessary condition for justice and a good human life. I will then in the subsequent sections illustrate in a more detailed way the critique against these claims.

<sup>9</sup> The concept of capability employed here by Page relays on anthropocentric assumptions and refers to the substantial conditions for leading a good human life. Accordingly, the ecosystems' capacity to regenerate themselves, i.e. to keep delivering vital ecosystem services, can be considered as a substantial condition for a good human life (see also Holland [29]). Extending the capabilities approach to include nonhuman beings is highly problematic, because it requires a reference to a concept of the 'good life' (Nussbaum) or of freedom (Sen). Indeed, Nussbaum extends it to nonhuman, sentient animals, by pointing out that due to sentience they are able to distinguish between good and bad. Accordingly, she claims for positive obligations towards all sentient animals, including wild ones [30]. This claim is fiercely rejected by most ecologists who see in it the danger of excessive human interventions that could threaten self-regulating natural processes like the predator–prey relation. Extending the capability approach to nonhuman animals would imply intricate ethical conflicts between positive obligations towards individual animals and the preservation of collectives (species, ecosystems, etc.).



### 3.1. *Growth as a condition for justice*

Several scholars point out the link between growth and prosperity on the one hand and growth and political, social, and financial stability on the other [31]. Jackson summarizes in his critique the reasons why growth is held to bring about fundamental benefits to society as follows: (a) opulence is a necessary condition for flourishing; (b) economic growth is closely correlated with certain basic entitlements; (c) growth is functional in maintaining economic and social stability [3]. By drawing on Holzinger I will list here some of the benefits that growth is supposed to deliver [19]:

1. Because economic growth increases the total amount of goods to be distributed such that more needs and preferences can be satisfied, growth generally enhances the standard of living and the quality of life of individuals (individual level). Under the assumption that individuals tend to maximize utility, growth is thus held to be a necessary condition for a 'good human life'. Moreover, wealth is held to be a necessary condition for individual freedom in shaping one's own life independently from the constraints of the community of origin.
2. Economic growth minimizes social conflicts and fosters democratic stability in welfare states. In fact, due to an increase in the total size of the cake, distribution (i.e. poverty alleviation) policies are less unpopular since they do not imply a significant reduction of wealth for the better off (institutional level). This is held to be a crucial condition for democracies, which rely on the largest possible consensus. Moreover, economic growth boosts government revenues for public services, thus helping social welfare systems.
3. Economic growth increases the well-being of all because, as the well-known dictum goes, 'a rising tide lifts all boats'. Advocates of growth refer to the virtuous cycle of the Kuznets Curve, according to which economic inequality increases over time up to a certain threshold while a country is developing, after which growth continues but inequality starts decreasing.
4. Economic growth is a necessary condition for employment. Increase of labor productivity and of labor force supply lead to rising unemployment unless the whole economy is growing faster than the per capita productivity of labor. Although it is dependent on population trends, this strong argument in favor of the correlation between economic growth and quality of life via employment is commonly shared by liberals and socialists [32].
5. Economic growth is necessary for environmental protection. Advocates of growth claim that by applying the Kuznets Curve to environmental issues a similar correlation can be drawn<sup>10</sup>: accordingly, the environmental impact on resources and sinks increases in correlation to GDP up to a certain threshold, above which the economy continues growing while the environmental impact decreases. Moreover, by driving technological investment, economic growth enables a significant improvement in terms of resource productivity and pollution control. Accordingly, economic growth plays a major role in terms of intergenerational justice (leaving to future generations not only more man-made capital but also better technologies to cope with environmental problems) and of intragenerational justice (solving environmental problems on a global scale by technological development).
6. According to Friedman, economic growth also has a positive influence on our moral attitudes in terms of tolerance of diversity, social mobility, commitment to fairness, and dedication to democracy "[34,p. 4] because it fosters the perspective of continuing prosperity and not only the achievement of a high living standard in absolute terms. By this reasoning, economic growth fosters high social mobility that puts prosperity within reach of a larger number of people. Moreover, rising economically implies rising socially. This is the so-called "American dream".

### 3.2. *Growth as a threat for justice*

In this section I briefly report some core elements of the degrowth critique against the claims that growth is a necessary condition for justice.

Several studies in recent decades have shown that the dictum that a rising tide rises all boats does not withstand thorough scrutiny. First, the so-called 'trickle-down effect' by which the worst off in a society automatically would benefit from an overall increment in wealth does not seem to hold anymore even in terms of mere income. Instead, the immanent logic of exponential growth seems to lead to increasing inequalities and thus to an increasing gap between rich and poor in the absence of institutional measures of redistribution of wealth; as studies show, economic growth in the last 25 years significantly improved low-end-incomes only in those countries with a more generous redistributive policy.<sup>11</sup> Far from being the result of an immanent correlation between growth and (in)equality, the Kuznets Curve applies only to countries in which redistribution was a major political commitment and effectively implemented. Even in poor countries, in which growth might be held to be a more important factor for wellbeing and for the improvement of quality of life, its impact depends much on how its fruits are used and on governmental policies [26,p. 44].

A similar critique applies to the Environmental Kuznets Curve. As the German Environment Advisory Council has shown, the virtuous cycle of the Environmental Kuznets Curve seems to have occurred only in very circumstantiated and specific cases (such as sulphate) and cannot be generalized so far [36]. Moreover, one of the reasons for the partial success of the EKC

<sup>10</sup> See for the Environmental Kuznets Curve among others Andreoni and Levinson [33].

<sup>11</sup> See among others Kenworthy [35].

in industrialized country is due to the transfer of production sectors that cause massive environmental impact to other countries with lower environmental standards [37,p. 332]. According to Meadows et al. (2004) much evidence supports a tight correlation between GDP growth and the destruction of the natural environment [38]. According to several degrowth-thinkers, the exploitation of resources and sinks at a rate that widely exceeds the regeneration capacity of the ecosystems is a direct consequence of the assumption of economic growth as the unique goal of the economic activity (growth fetishisms).

As evidence suggests, the expected decoupling between resource impact and economic growth is not occurring on an absolute scale: despite a relative increase in resource productivity (i.e. relative to production unit) has been registered, the total consumption of resources has increased significantly due to the well-known phenomenon of the rebound and macro-rebound effect. As Schneider clearly illustrates, as long as the ‘capacity to exploit’ – in line with the immanent logic of exponential growth – is being expanded (infrastructures, deregulation of financial markets, investments in technologies for further access to natural resources, advertising and the creation of unsatisfied needs, acceleration, etc.) ‘green’ regulation arrangements like ecological taxation do not bring any significant improvement in the overall trend in absolute terms [39].

According to degrowth advocates, the consequences in terms of justice are self-evident: growth-induced climate change affects the fundamental living conditions in terms of survival and quality of life for an increasing number of people on Earth, especially in poor countries, now and in the future. Moreover, the increasing need for new resources and sinks leads to geopolitical forms of domination and economic dependency (production of biomass for the Global North, neo-colonialist land grabs<sup>12</sup>). According to Martinez-Alier the environmentalist movement in the Global South is mostly driven by a struggle for the preservation of fundamental livelihoods. People do not only fight for their bare existence but for the preservation of a dignified and meaningful life within their social and natural environment (a life that they have reasons to value, as Sen would say). Accordingly, Martinez-Alier pleads for degrowth in industrialized countries (as a necessary step to reach a sustainable path) and limited growth for poor countries, in order for them to achieve a higher standard of living [41].

Other degrowth-scholars follow a more radical claim and reject growth as a feasible and desirable path even for poor countries altogether. They claim that economic growth as we know it arose under the very condition of exploitation of other human lives (slaves, women, peasants, etc.) and of nature (land in colonies, exponentially increasing rates of usage of resources, etc.) and therefore growth is unthinkable without these forms of exploitation and domination for present and future generations [1,42,43]. Especially post-development scholars provocatively claim for a right of the South to poverty (a concept that they distinguish from destitution [42]) and therefore, to ‘degrowth’. In fact, the increasing destitution of the countries of the global South is held to be a consequence of the growth logic: these countries are rendered completely dependent on the Global North in their economic choices as well as in their cultural orientation.

As to intergenerational justice the main controversy is about what is held to be the ‘just’ legacy (the “fair bequest package”) that current generations owe to subsequent ones, i.e. the controversy between weak and strong sustainability. Advocates of weak sustainability assume a far-reaching substitutability among types of capital (man-made, natural, human, etc.) and claim that a fair bequest package consists of a constant (cumulative) total level of capital. In practice, this means that nature can be consumed provided that other capital reserves are built up in its place. Accordingly, the preservation of natural resources makes sense as a goal only if it is proved to be more efficient in monetary terms than preserving other capital stocks. Expressing the value of natural resources in monetary terms for the sake of comparability is a particularly troubling feature of the weak sustainability approach. The deontological meaning of intergenerational duties is limited to a constraint imposed on maximization paths. The ethical idea is expressed as “non-declining utility over time” [9]. From this point of view, economic growth can be considered almost in terms of an obligation towards future generations to increase the overall portfolio.

Advocates of strong sustainability, like Herman Daly [44], plead for a manifold structured legacy due to presumed limits of substitution between different capital stocks. By developing Daly’s arguments further, Ott and Döring show that substitution between natural capital and man-made capital is highly limited and depends on the qualitative specificity of natural capital.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is not only about whether or not and to what extent nature can be substituted in the production process, but also about whether “we” can justify this substitution in the eyes of future generations. By listing several arguments against a tout-court substitution (multifunctionality of ecological processes, precautionary principle, more freedom of choice for future generations, better compatibility with generally shared intuitions concerning the non-monetary value of non-human nature and our duties of preserving it) they substantiate a strong argument for the moral obligation to preserve the qualitative specificities of natural capital for future generations [8].<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3. Growth as an impediment for the good life

Growth is not only questioned as a condition for distributive justice, but also as a driver for promoting both, happiness and the good life. I will show this by considering subjective, objective, and intersubjective conditions for the good life.

<sup>12</sup> Large Scale Land Acquisition (commonly termed ‘land grab’) is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to one driver alone, although the increasing need of resources (energy and food security: biomass; arable land; water, etc.) and sinks (carbon offsetting, etc.) has been playing a very significant role in the last decade [40].

<sup>13</sup> This does not preclude in principle the possibility of limited substitution in particular cases.

<sup>14</sup> For Ott’s position with respect to the degrowth-debate see his contribution in this issue.

### 3.3.1. Subjective conditions

As several studies show, a negative correlation can be shown between GDP per capita and subjectively perceived happiness. According to the satisfaction paradox, happiness level increases parallel to income up to a certain threshold over which they start diverging significantly [3,45].

Accordingly, dynamic inequality (linked with some social mobility), which to a certain extent stimulates economic growth since it acts as an incentive to work more in order to climb the social ladder, does not seem to have the positive effects that Friedman points out. Rather, social inequality is a main reason for subjective unhappiness because of the constant positional competition and the resulting treadmills [46]. The spiral of competition becomes an end in itself and leads to a significant reduction of the various and diverse human abilities to the only the ability to compete; in other words those who 'win' are not necessarily better at what they win, but rather at winning itself [47]. According to Binswanger we are all somehow 'trapped' in these treadmills, which while promising happiness foster constant dissatisfaction; for example, due to a phenomenon similar to the rebound effect, innovative time-saving devices lead to an intensification of the workload that require even more time than before, rather than saving time for other 'free' activities. Similarly, due to the status or the hedonic treadmills, constant comparisons with others (so-called 'social envy') have a negative impact on subjectively perceived happiness. With respect to the fabrication of purely fictive desires, Rahnama speaks of a 'social construction of envy' by means of marketing and advertising [42].

### 3.3.2. Objective conditions

As I have exposed above, although subjectively perceived happiness plays a role in the consideration of the good life, it is not a sufficiently reliable ground for ethical issues. Objective criteria are needed.<sup>15</sup>

The claim that growth increases the amount of goods at disposal and therefore improves quality of life relies on the assumption of non-satiation, according to which humans tend to maximize their utility and never reach a level of complete satiation of needs and preferences.

Moreover, it assumes that quality of life is a function of the satisfaction of preferences by means of material or immaterial (but monetarizable) goods. According to the capabilities approach, having more goods at disposal does not say much about how people actually live and what they are able to do with them.

A negative correlation can be shown by drawing on objective criteria as well: as the so-called threshold hypothesis has shown, at least for industrialized countries growth in terms of GDP and quality of life decouple after a certain threshold. While GDP keeps growing, the ISEW (Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare),<sup>16</sup> which is adopted by Max-Neef as an objective measure for quality of life, might even start decreasing [49].<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the competition spiral does not only imply a reduction in the subjective perception of happiness. Social inequality and competition have a direct impact also on the capabilities to achieve basic functionings since frustration, lack of social recognition, and shame can significantly reduce substantial freedoms in terms of real opportunities to shape one's own life in a dignified and meaningful way. Far from being only a matter of dissatisfaction, this restriction is due to systemic conditions: dynamic inequality caused by growth leads to a structural shift in the access to the basic substantial conditions for achieving important functionings. The standard for a 'good life' gets higher and higher not only in the subjective perception, but also objectively. Private transportation is a good example: if everyone drives around with a SUV, driving a small car on the highway is not only a matter of social status, but of personal safety; having a computer up to date or a smart phone is often a necessity in order to live a decent life in terms of work but also in terms of communication with friends, doctors, offices and the like. Uta von Winterfeld claims the *right* to a sufficient life style, the right to have less, to be slower, without having to suffer a significant lack of substantial freedoms [51].

A similar argument can be made for the countries in the Global South, in which traditionally the access to many substantial conditions for a 'good life' used not to be mediated through money and therefore did not require a certain level of income. Some structural changes brought about in order to 'eradicate poverty' in these countries on the one hand may increase people's income, while on the other they sometimes destroy the original competences and opportunities for accessing substantial conditions for a good life. The loss of local knowledge, the erosion of social networks, and the imposition of western patterns of negotiation and measurement contribute to this erosion [42,52].

Moreover, steady competition linked to social mobility and functional to growth destroys social connections and undermines the possibility of other forms of relations not mediated by market values. In terms of the capabilities approach, this can lead to a lessening of substantial freedoms and a significant loss in quality of life.

### 3.3.3. Intersubjective conditions

Claims for the good life include most of the time a complex imaginary of societal patterns and strong pleas about how a society and our life in it should be like. Confining claims for the good life to the field of life-style decisions, which do not

<sup>15</sup> Even from the point of view of Harsanyi's impartial observer we might need additional information about states of affairs in order to figure up an ideal situation disentangled from actual distortions.

<sup>16</sup> ISEW subtracts defensive expenditures against environmental degradation and the depreciation of natural capital from GDP and adds services due to domestic labor [48].

<sup>17</sup> A similar threshold-phenomenon can be shown with the GPI (genuine progress indicator), as Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi have pointed out [50].



primarily belong to the realm of justice, paradoxically already implies a particular claim for a substantial understanding of the good life within society. Accordingly, the good life is conceived as consisting in individual choices that can and should indifferently coexist in society as long as they do not threaten the fundamental rights and liberties of others. This understanding is likely to be functional to a society oriented to and driven by economic growth. However, such a claim competes with alternative understandings of the good life as more fundamentally depending on social interaction and reciprocal recognition.<sup>18</sup>

As Honneth has shown, recognition – not intended in terms of approval or admiration but in the more fundamental sense of being acknowledged in the public sphere – is a fundamental condition for the development of one's own personal identity and therefore for being human: it is essential for human beings to 'appear' to and be 'seen' in their peculiar specificity by others [53]. Struggles for recognition in terms of the societal acceptability and visibility of diversified patterns of life are a crucial element for the further development (also in terms of moral development) of society. Rather than mirroring private lifestyle preferences, issues concerning the idea of a 'good life' turn into fundamental claims about the interpretation of the basic value patterns that serve as orientation for society. Thus intended, they belong to the core field of justice issues and require negotiation in intersubjective discourses, in which, according to Sen, good reasons for the valuing of functionings are exchanged. What counts is not what kind of individual preferences people entertain in their private perspectives, but what they 'value and have reason to value', i.e. what they claim in the face of others as their idea of what is a good human life [26].

Claims about the 'good life' are influenced by diversified factors and constraints, among which 'cultural' assessments and stratified values play a major role. By drawing on a famous example given by Smith and often quoted by Sen, we can sum up the subjective, objective, and intersubjective conditions for the good life as follows: affording shoes can be considered as a subjective condition for happiness (if one loves shoes, collects them, etc.), as an objective condition for being, say, healthy (especially in cold countries), or as an intersubjective condition for leading a good life in the face of others in a society, in which wearing shoes is considered a symbol for decency and reliability.

The question about who has access to the negotiation and can actively and freely participate in the decision-making process, and under which conditions, is crucial in terms of justice. In order for participatory parity [54] not to stay merely formal but to allow for effective participation two conditions must be met according to Fraser: "First, the distribution of material resources must be such as to ensure participants' independence and 'voice'" (objective condition); second, "it requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem" (intersubjective condition) [54, p. 27]. Therefore, all forms of exploitation, gross disparities in wealth and in leisure time as well as value patterns that "deny some people the status of full partners" [54] should be avoided, because they hinder the ability of all participants to interact as peers.

The issue of justice applies not only to different models of a possible degrowth society, but also to the transition path towards their realization. The principle of participatory parity and the attention given to actual functionings and capabilities can serve as a touchstone for assessing different proposals under the light of justice.

### 3.4. Perspectives for a 'just' degrowth society

At this point one can reformulate Latouche's phrase that degrowth is only possible in a degrowth society by saying that a 'just' degrowth society, in which claims for the good life are constitutive for justice, is only possible if patterns of recognition and established values are renegotiated.

Alternative models for this renegotiation are being experimented with or without the explicit label 'degrowth' by activists groups all over the world (transition towns, solidarity economy, ethical purchasing groups, community supported agriculture, etc.) as well as developed by scholars from different countries and political traditions. Their claims refer to structural changes in the political and economic structure, individual conversions, and struggles for alternative patterns of recognition and togetherness within society. I will mention here only few perspectives, which I consider relevant to my argument.

By drawing on the evidence of a decoupling between happiness and growth some scholars plead for alternative paths to individual happiness (by a cultural shift towards more traditional values) and accordingly for a reallocation of social services (especially in the care sector) to the family and the private, due to the unavoidable decreasing of tax revenues and therefore a necessary shrinking of the Welfare State [20]. However, the focus on subjective happiness does not say much either about substantial forms of discrimination and exclusion from the negotiation table or about patterns of redistribution of wealth. Especially from a feminist and gender perspective proposals like this risk neglecting crucial aspects of participatory parity.

The German economist Niko Paech develops a model for a post-growth economy, in which quantitative (sufficiency, absolute reduction of production and consumption, voluntary simplicity) and qualitative (gradual and significant shift from market-based supply to local subsistence economy and radical self-supply orientation) as well as individual and structural (institutional innovations such as land reform) are combined. Accordingly, state and administrative institutions would gradually leave room for self-supplying localities with a minimum of market-based exchange. Moreover, Paech pleads

<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in most individual choices we seek more or less intentionally the approval of (some) others and tacitly advance claims for the establishment of specific values, criteria and patterns of recognition. This applies also to values like the promotion and efficient maximization of one's own interests (magazines and media are full of this struggle for the recognition and establishment of these patterns).

for an equal distribution of the per capita amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as a regulative constraint, within which everyone might freely choose what kind of life she wants to live [2]. Unfortunately, reflections about the negotiation framework are lacking. Moreover, given that different individuals are differently able to convert resources and chances into functionings, having an equal constraint and equal requirements in terms of self-supply might lead to significant injustice in the absence of coordinating institutions that through politics of redistribution counteract discrimination and exclusion and provide formal and substantial conditions for participatory parity and the good life.

When Latouche speaks about a decolonization of the imaginary of growth in terms of a kind of addiction treatment he seems well aware of the need for a renegotiation of recognition patterns. According to him, all single actions, be they individual choices or structural changes, make sense only if embedded in the larger project of a collective ‘metanoia’—a radical rethinking that has to take place at the heart of civil society [1]. However, he does not offer a framework for the process of renegotiation either. His claim for re-localization is exposed to the risk of radical localisms and the idealization of relational and social networks. However, these should not be overestimated in general, because they can implement and hide relations of oppression and domination. The role of economic independency in terms of income can be crucial, as several projects of empowering women in traditional societies by means of education and small credit support show. The correlation between wealth and quality of life seems to hold at least up to a certain threshold.

Finally, a major challenge for all degrowth thinkers is how to address the question of work and labor in a post- or degrowth society. The access to gainful work is considered as a very important component of quality of life not only in terms of standard of living, but also because it enables recognition, participation and social networks. For some, unemployment is considered an act of violence, because it attacks the physical and psychic-intellectual integrity, as well as the inviolacy of the persons affected. However, from the point of view of the capabilities approach, labor is an essential aspect of quality of life only if it factually enables a decent life and promotes human flourishing. The main issue to be addressed from an ethical point of view is whether the act of violence consists in unemployment as such rather than in the social and personal consequences that unemployment currently brings about in a society based on the paradigm of labor. As long as gainful work is not only the capital means for keeping poverty at bay, but also and even more importantly the vehicle for recognition, for the sense of one’s own dignity, and for social participation, the access to it is to be considered a fundamental right in terms of capability. It is therefore not enough to plead, as advocates of degrowth do, for a decoupling between paid work and income and for a more comprehensive definition of work, which encompasses beside gainful work also care work, voluntary work, and domestic work [55]. This shift requires more than a change in the institutional and political system and cannot be successful if it does not address the issue of alternative forms of social recognition and public participation for all citizens. From the point of view of the capabilities approach this is a crucial issue of justice.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the point of view of the capabilities approach, what counts for justice is what people are actually capable of being and doing according to their conception of a good life. As I have shown, this conception is not the same as the hedonic idea of arbitrary preferences to be satisfied but implies the critical and intersubjective scrutiny of the reasons why something is considered valuable. This approach requires an open field for deliberation and a public space where everyone can ‘appear’ and be seen and heard. From the point of view of the capabilities approach, economic growth above a certain threshold does not seem to be a necessary condition for quality of life and for justice. Although it might help in certain cases to support basic capabilities, it also may lead to a significant reduction in the variety of opportunities and capabilities that people have. On the other hand, degrowth seems to take more seriously the challenge of the capabilities approach in so far as it focuses on quality of life and sets a ‘good life’ as a goal. However, in the current models proposed for a degrowth society crucial questions of justice are still open and have to be addressed in the near future.

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