



Variants of de-growth and deliberative democracy: A Habermasian proposal

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to determine the relationship between variants of degrowth strategies and prospects for further democratization. In a first step, four variants of degrowth policies are distinguished. In a second step, a Habermasian approach to deliberative democracy will be outlined which will be enriched by some proposals for environmental democracy. Finally, a position on environmental deliberative democracy and degrowth orientation is presented.

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1. Introduction

It is a philosophical task to clarify concepts and to determine conceptual relationships. This task shall be performed in this article. The relationship between, on the one hand, an economic and cultural order beyond an orientation toward growth and, on the other hand, a democratic mode of political governance should be analyzed in order to ask which combinations of de-growth orientation and democratic policy making might be feasible, attractive or even mandatory. Therefore, the paper distinguishes, first, some variants of de-growth. This distinction is inspired by van den Bergh [1]. Second, some points on democracy are made. Third, a Habermasian approach of democratic life is taken into account more closely. Fourth, this concept of deliberative democracy will be enriched by some components that stem from recent debates in the field of environmental democracy. Finally, I claim that reformist variants of de-growth strategies and ambitious variants of democracy can, at least conceptually, be conjoined to a viable and wishful political outlook.

2. Claims and variants of degrowth¹

Let us start with the statement that “Degrowth” (DG) is a political slogan with theoretical implications [2]. This slogan must be specified if there should be any meaningful sense of implication. Clearly, the political DG-movement has many heterogeneous traditions and it entails many projects and proposals. I like to start with the attitude of a warm welcome to inspiring political ideas, including radical dissenting votes, from more Mediterranean traditions which bring fresh air into political debates which have been dominated by Anglo-Saxonian mainstream concepts of political liberalism for decades. But if those many ideas, projects, and proposals shall not make DG a *proteus* that always shifts its figure, it seems mandatory to identify some essential or constitutive claims of DG.

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¹ The best overview over the current DG-debate is given by Martinez-Alier et al. [2]. Personally, I am deeply indebted to Muraca's comments on different degrowth theorists for this paper [3]. The article has also been inspired by a recent volume that documents the degrowth debate in Germany [4].

2.1. Preliminary distinctions and claims

Making DG more specific, however, is problematic because the “De” in the slogan is a kind of negator that can be differently read: “A”, “Alter”, “Anti”, “No”. For instance, A-Growth would, in analogy to “atheism”, mean that one should not believe in economic growth any more. Anti-Growth would rather mean that one should not just alter one’s belief system but should actively engage against growth-related economic structures and policies that support them. I do not wish to present a logical analysis of how one can negate (deny, oppose, reject) growth but only point at this negation-problem for further debate.

The second problem is about the meaning of “growth” that can be interpreted either in a *narrow* or in a *broad* sense. A narrow interpretation focuses on gross domestic product (GDP) and its growth rates, while a broader interpretation argues that DG is not just referring to GDP but to other economic and political institutions as well. The line of reasoning underlying the broader interpretation is a kind of reasoning “not only GDP, but also a, b, c . . . z” which can turn out to be a long list of societal affairs that should be rejected in some sense of the supposed “De”. The broader interpretation opens the floor for a “De-Growth of What?”-debate with many answers as de-growth of competition, consumerism, domination over nature, technological innovation, inequality of income, capital accumulation, capacities to exploit, working hours, and the like. The broad reading can make sense of the different readings of the negation “De”. If DG in a broad sense (DG(B)) is seen as mandatory under some normative claims (!), the (simplified) logical structure of this position is²:

$$DG(B) \rightarrow ! \neg (a, b, c, \dots, z)$$

The combination of the different readings of “De” with the distinction between narrow (N) and broad (B) interpretation of “growth” constitutes a broad range of political positions that *prima facie* fall into the general DG-concept. This range has one edge at a position that is A-Growth(N) and an other edge at a Anti-Growth(B) position. If so, one should expect sharp political conflicts within this broad DG-range. We will adopt these distinctions in order to type DG-variants (Section 2.2).

Another conceptual problem occurs with respect to *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* reasons by which DG might be substantiated. Intrinsic reasons mean that x should be realized for the sake of x because x is intrinsically good. There are, for instance, intrinsic reasons to value democracy, justice, friendship, and virtues. It is harder to value de-growth for intrinsic reasons. Whatever DG may be, it is not an end in itself. This seems true for all variants within the range. This claim implies that it would be misleading to support DG for the sake of de-growth. But, on the other hand, DG is clearly more than just an instrumental mean to some end. It would be misleading to conceive de-growth policies merely as a set of means M by which a target function T can be reached. If so, DG is neither an end in itself nor simply a mean to some end. If this neither-nor should not be a fatal trap, one has to conceive DG as something beyond the distinction between means and ends. One can and should see DG as a meaningful transition process toward a good (valuable, mandatory, fair and just, steady, sustainable) final state of affairs. Furthermore, it must be supposed that the final state of affairs is superior either (a) to the present state or (b) to a state that would follow from the present state without DG-policies (for instance, a period of social and environmental crisis). This underlying superiority-claim might be specified in terms of distributive justice, sustainability, autonomy, capability enhancement, emancipation, and the like. Terms, however nicely and attractive they may be defined, are not claims and arguments yet. A mere vocabulary would not do the discursive job of arguing why (post-)industrial societies should undertake such great transformation away from the growth paradigm.

The final problem I wish to address at this outset is entailed in Latouche’s claim that successful DG-policies might be possible in a degrowth-society only [5]. If this “only if” is taken seriously as a necessary condition for political success of DG, the claim will sound fatal because, as a matter of fact, we do not live in a DG-society yet and DG-orientations have no cultural hegemony. Only a tiny fraction of the current population in the EU is committed to DG in its habits, attitudes, values, convictions, and morals. Almost all other nations outside the EU are devoted to economic growth. If so, a political strategy to realize stronger variants of DG seems critical from the outset. One might interpret this claim as a warning that DG strategies might be fragile.³ This has some implications for concepts of democracy that give DG a chance.

2.2. Variants of degrowth

For the sake of argumentation, I wish to distinguish four variants (types) of DG:

DG-1: Here, degrowth is taken literally (narrow reading) and primarily refers to GDP. GDP-fixation and GDP-fetishism is rejected. GDP is regarded as being (1) a mere measure of economic activity and (2) as one indicator of social welfare among many. In developed countries, other factors contribute more to the social welfare of average people than permanent high growth rates of GDP. GDP and quality of life have run parallel for some period of economic development (mass consumption after Second World War) but GDP splits from quality of life later on. This is a modest macro-economic claim that is in line with Max-Neef’s threshold hypothesis [6] and many recent findings on economics of happiness [7]. There are studies indicating that, at least in wealthy countries as Switzerland, participation in democratic life contributes more to welfare than

² The sign \rightarrow stands for “implication”, \neg means “negation”, and ! means “should be”. Combinations of ! and \neg mean that some x should not be done or should be abolished.

³ Another reading of this “only if”-claim would be the strategy to put the blame for failures onto current society in advance. I set this reading aside.

growth of GDP [8]. According to DG-1, growth rates of GDP, as van den Bergh has argued, should be seen highly relaxed. In this interpretation, rates of GDP must not even be permanently below zero but might fluctuate on low positive and negative rates. Therefore, the question does not occur whether DG implies growth rates being negative without end. The advantage of DG-1 is to liberate our minds from any kind of GDP-fixation which might be continued if we horrify any growth of GDP. By implication, DG-1 rejects growth rates of GDP as evidence for good policy making.

DG-1 is a modest claim which finds increasing support among social democrats, conservatives, churches, and even among the growing camp of prudent and reflective economists. For several years, there has been a critical debate on GDP within established policy networks [9]. DG-1 had been former intellectual mainstream in “Green” parties since the 1980s, although many Green parties have devoted themselves to “smart green growth” concepts since the 1990s. After the honeymoon of Green parties with the growth-mania in the 1990s, some Green parties now re-discover their roots. In Germany, a so-called “enquête commission” of parliament whose task is to consider alternatives to GDP-growth has been established recently [10]. There are even conservative communitarian variants of DG-1 which emphasize family values, engagement without payment, charity, modesty, sufficiency, and the like [11].

DG-2: Here, de-growth is seen as being a mandatory strategy in order to reach specific environmental goals that might be dubbed as “strong sustainability” [12], strong reduction of material throughput in the economic system, and standards of environmental justice which can be determined by a threshold within a capability approach and is enlarged to future generations. DG-2 is seen as one crucial strategy on a trajectory toward strong sustainability which must be combined with specific strategies in fields of environmental policy making.⁴ The primary concern of this “green wing” of the DG-camp is about environmental protection and nature conservation and restoration. As it has been argued in a broad scope of literature, permanent growth orientation cannot be a viable universal economic strategy since natural resources are limited, living systems have already been overused, the atmospheric sink of greenhouse-gases has been already filled up to critical limits, and the impacts of growth upon both ecologic and human systems are repugnant. This can be exemplified with respect to rapidly growing countries as China [13].

DG-2 is not ignorant on the political economy of nature (“political ecology”). The many macro-rebound strategies that aim at expanding the limits of economic growth further [14] tend toward commodification of nature rather than toward sustainable utilization of common goods. If so, DG-2 has to address critically (1) different macro-rebound strategies (as control over seeds, “land-grabbing”, and the outlook for solar radiation management in climate change policies) and it also has to look closely (2) for property regimes. There are some hopes in DG-2 that the tendencies toward privatization might be reversed into a “return of the commons” [15]. DG-2 opposes the “tragedy of open access” that has been misnamed “tragedy of the commons” by Hardin [16]. DG-2 leaves room for several types of property rights regimes including utilization schemes of common goods by associations. DG-2 is critical against privatization of water provision schemes, tracks and grids, forests and fish stocks, and the like.

DG-2 is primarily interested in impacts of economic growth and consumerism upon natural systems. It does oppose growth of GDP because such impacts occur. If such impacts could be avoided or strongly reduced, growth of GDP can be tolerated. DG-2 does not wish to make negative growth rates a new fetish. The critical point is whether growth of GDP can or cannot come about with shrinking material throughput and with less impact on natural systems. A critical claim against DG-2 is: “Dematerialization of economic growth to a sustainable state is impossible”. Dematerialization of growth might be possible in pure economic modeling but it cannot be expected under real-world conditions. This assumption is often warranted by case-studies on rebound effects. Rebound-effects clearly occur and dematerialization is not taking place at the moment [17]. The decisive question is whether rebound-effects can be overcome in a new stage of phasing out some kinds of consumptive goods and productions. DG-2 can oppose both micro- and macro-rebound effects by combinations of phasing out outdated products, taxing energy prices, standardization, and encouraging social change, as patterns of recognition (DG-3).⁵ The step to take is the step from mere de-coupling to substantial phasing out. Phasing out and “green” investments are seen as two sides of the coin.

Such de-growth of developed countries might be seen mandatory if Southern countries kept some environmental space (however defined) left for their economic development which, according to our moral hopes, might benefit the poor strata in the global South and not elites that copy the Western way of life. De-growth in the North might be a prerequisite for sustainable development in the South which eradicates misery, alleviates poverty and strengthens democratic regimes. Such prerequisite, of course, is not a strong causal nexus and by no means a sufficient condition.

A stronger variant of DG-2 (DG-2+) sees de-growth as integral part of a global “contraction and convergence” (C&C)-regime [18]. Such C&C-regime limits the overall throughput of the economic sphere according to ecological constraints (“contraction”) and it distributes the remaining entitlements for making use of natural resources more equally in the middle and longer run (“convergence”). While DG-2 already has a limiting effect of social disparities, DG-2+ puts more emphasis on equality. Quality of human life should be distributed more equal around the globe. If, additionally, inherent moral value is

⁴ As shifting subsidies in agrarian policies, improving biodiversity conservation, establishing ecological standards in forestry, determining safe biological limits in fisheries, abating Greenhouse-gas-emission by strict emission trading schemes and the like.

⁵ The long-term gains of a policy-driven technological innovation strategy toward “dematerialization mainstreaming” should be assessed, as it has been done by the German Environmental Advisory Council in its different reports (www.umweltrat.de).

attributed to natural beings contraction must become more stringent than in an anthropocentric framework.⁶ Such global egalitarian and non-anthropocentric C&C-regime might, perhaps, be a second stage of DG-2 after strong sustainability has been reached. Thus, DG-2 is a task for the time being, while DG-2+ is an option for posterity and, perhaps, for theoretical combinations of DG and “Deep Ecology”.

DG-3: De-growth is seen as liberating our lives from pervasive competition, “rat race”-careers, dependency on monetary income, acceleration of the speed of life [19,20], noise and many kinds of struggling. It clearly supposes a critical diagnosis about pathological effects of hegemonic lifestyles based on competition, careers, and consumption. By opposing such lifestyles and visions of happiness, DG-3 wishes to improve overall quality of life. DG-3 is neither a mere opposition nor a mean to some end but both a fresh counter-culture and a strategy of de-commodification, including new imageries of human flourishing (opposed to commercial advertisement). DG-3 performs a strategy of non-compliance with established patterns of behavior.

DG-3 is a recommendation of an Aristotelian orientation toward eudaimonia. People who are committed to DG-3 can remind the ancient virtues of hospitality, generosity, friendship, modesty, sufficiency, and the like. From an ethical perspective, DG-3 is somewhat close to virtue ethics. DG-3 often adopts “queer” practices that ironically subvert established standards and common expectations. To DG-3, political participation and citizenship are seen as intrinsic components of a good life. Thus, DG-3 supports further democratization of democratic life.

In combination with some assumptions about more equal schemes of how labor, income and wealth should be distributed, DG-3 seems promising for social and cultural life at large, including democratic political life. DG-3 assumes that there will be many benefits of such cultural “*metanoia*” to be registered in terms of patterns of mutual recognition, gender, education, health, political participation, family and community life, leisure, love, and the like. Realizing all the gains of de-growth in more convivial ways, most people would not miss growth after all even if transition periods might be critical.

DG-4: Here, de-growth is seen as an integral part of an overall strategy to transform and eventually replace capitalistic modes of production and distribution by other modes. DG-4 is broad and it interprets the “De” more rigidly as anti-capitalism. This broad strategy includes a transformation of property rights, control over capital stocks, tax systems, role of markets and public services, investment controls, and the like. DG-4 does not only attack GDP but basic economic structures (“system”). Of course, DG-4 appears in many variants which stem from different leftist traditions (socialism, communism, anarchism, syndicalism, trade unionism, theorists of “Empire” and so on).

But despite all intrinsic heterogeneity there is a common profile of DG-4. DG-4 is united under the claim that reforms and regulations of contemporary capitalism would not suffice and the system should be shifted. There is the implicit assumption in DG-4 that there is no variant of capitalism that can be reconciled with DG-1, DG-2, DG-3, ideas of political and distributive justice as well as real democracy. This argument often is presented as incompatibility-claim: The current economic system *S* (capitalism, Empire) is (structurally) incompatible with *X*. Thus, one cannot have both *S* and *X*. *X* is seen as either highly desirable or morally mandatory (!*X*). Thus, one must negate *S*. This incompatibility claim can be noted in simple deontic terms⁷:

$$S \nu X \tag{1}$$

$$S \rightarrow \neg X \tag{2}$$

$$X \rightarrow \neg S \tag{3}$$

$$!X \tag{4}$$

$$!X \rightarrow !(\neg S) \tag{5}$$

$$!(\neg S) \tag{6}$$

The conclusion in (6) might be put in ordinary political language: “Make capitalism history!” The crucial premise in this inferential scheme is, of course, (1) because it entails a disjunction from which (2) and (3) can be derived. Since (1) is not an axiomatic truth, (1) must be substantiated on economic grounds. It remains unclear what counts as satisfying substantiation of (1).

It is fair to say that there are many implicit assumptions in DG-4. Explicitness is required if DG-4 does not simply suppose that any political order, whatever their details, will be “better” than and “superior” to industrial capitalism and political liberalism. If one tacitly assumes that the current system is horrible then almost any transformation seems to be an improvement.⁸ If one paints the current system completely black because of the pervasive exploitation, frustration, injustice, destructiveness, commodification, crisis, and control it will bring all about, any change counts as improvement. But if one

⁶ Neither DG in general nor DG-2+ is committed to a specific solution of the demarcation problem. DG-2 might be combined with (biocentric) “Deep Ecology” but I could not find such combination in the literature. It seems fair to say that no variant of DG focuses on the demarcation problem.

⁷ The sign ν means disjunctive “or”, \rightarrow stands for “implication”, \neg means “negation”, $!$ means “should be” or “mandatory”.

⁸ If most people have nothing to lose but their misery and their chains but might win a better world (Marx), then there will hardly be any reasons to hesitate.

sees many achievements and advancements of current Western societies a radical transformation must be carefully assessed according to risks and gains. Some explicit remarks of how a post-capitalistic and post-growth society should be institutionalized might be helpful for further debate on DG-4. Explicitness is also required with respect to concepts of democracy that are conjoined with DG-4 and with ideas of how the shift should be performed.

In DG-4, there is often the presupposition that de-stabilization of current system is a necessary condition of such systemic shift. DG-1, DG-2 and even DG-3 remain reform-oriented and they remain interested in the cohesion of society and in the maintenance of its achievements. They wish to enhance political and social resilience beyond growth. This is somewhat different within DG-4. If there is such difference between DG-1,2,3 and DG-4, it is a difference that makes a political difference.

2.3. A personal DG-profile and some caveats

These four ideal variants can be combined in many ways. Ultimately, there might be personal DG-profiles rather than fixed types. Personally, I endorse DG-1 with emphasis. I also endorse DG-2, supposing that persistent growth of global GDP is incompatible with strong sustainable development on the same global scale. By prudent de-growth strategies, developed nations should release opportunities for Southern nations for genuine sustainable development. Developed nations can and should take the lead as environmental forerunners without further delay. According to DG-2, persistent high growth rates in large Southern countries are non-sustainable, too. DG-2 is mandatory unless societal practice gives reasons to assume that GDP can be further increased with far less impacts on nature. The burden of proof falls upon such optimism. To my mind, DG-2 shall provide the ground for long-term DG-2+.

DG-3 hopes for convivial communities in which life can be enjoyed more deeply. Convivial ways of life which are freely adopted by persons that like to share both fruits of the Earth and joy of life are clearly to be welcomed. Moreover, the longing for community may motivate persons to engage in commonly shared economic projects as eco-villages, cooperatives, co-housing initiatives, and the like. In principle, such projects can be freely initiated within current society.⁹ It seems possible to modify laws in order to make them more supportive for DG-3-projects.

DG-3 becomes problematic if the ideals of convivial life are transposed on the level of society. If this is being done, DG-3 rests on anthropological and ethical claims with respect of how human might behave if de-growth becomes a societal reality. The anthropological claim that “giving” and “taking” are constitutive for social bonding [21]¹⁰ does not imply that give–take-systems can replace current systems of exchange mediated by money, contracts, and law. It does not even imply that give–take-relations are morally superior to mediated types of social exchange. Hardly anybody would like to replace the modern welfare state by trust in solidarities of neighborhoods or networks of friends. As we know since Tönnies [22] the modern tension between the longing for community and the realities of societal life turns out to be a tragic predicament. DG-3 should better avoid the failure in social ontology to confuse community and society. Ultimately, the features of modern society (law, markets, money, science, administration, technological progress and the like) are strong forces in the project of modernity and such bonds of society differ from the bonds of communities.

All in all, DG-3 is far less risky on a lifestyle-, virtue- and project-level than on a societal and political level. If so, we should start DG-3 at the level of virtues, mutual recognition, convivial networks and common projects. Law and policy-making may encourage such convivial styles of life but also must be somewhat neutral against different modes of life. By democratic policy making, people might be slightly nudged toward specific lifestyles but the achievements of cultural pluralism and privacy must be respected under any DG-trajectory. DG-2 and DG-3 can be mutually supportive.

I take DG-4 very seriously but I do not endorse it. My skepticism against DG-4 rests on a bundle of reasons, some of which are theoretical ones, some rest in experiences I had with(in) leftist groups in Germany in the “red decade” of the 1970s and, ten years later, with the collapse of Eastern socialism, especially German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989 that left both people and land in economic, cultural, and moral ruins and with high environmental burdens in heavily polluted regions. Moreover, I did never see any socialist regime in the world that I could find attractive according to my standards of cultural freedom and political liberty. This more personal background may be seen as a specific German bias. Nevertheless, personal political experiences may not only explain but also justify a rather high degree of risk-aversion against new anti-capitalist experiments on a societal scale.

My theoretical reasons are about deficits of DG-4 with respects to economy theory, theory of society, theory of democracy and even theories of justice. If theorists as Marcuse and Castoriadis are seen the “great figures” behind DG-4, one cannot overlook deep philosophical problems in Marcuse’s concept of erotic reason [24] and in Castoriadis’ concept of the revolutionary project [25] to which I turn in the next section. The many theoretical problems in the peculiar combination of Hegelian dialectics, classical British economics, and early French socialism that constitute the work of Karl Marx have been addressed in more comments than any scholar can read in a lifetime. Since I do not like “Marx in a nutshell”, I remain silent on this author here. I will present my theoretical concerns in a more neutral language. *Path-dependencies* occur under any political trajectory. So they do under DG-4. Path-dependencies are to be correlated with regulations by law

⁹ From an historical point of view, such DG-3-projects have been initiated since 1900 but, regretfully, they never became a mass-movement within modern societies. Many of them failed. It is an empirical question how many contemporary DG-3-experiments will fail or flourish.

¹⁰ See also Caillé, *Anthropologie du don. Le tiers paradigme* [23].

and with macro-economic policy-making (according to some underlying economic theory). Path-dependencies mean that a revolutionary shift has an economic and political logic of its own. Such path-dependencies are not well explored by the DG-4 camp in terms of transaction costs, control costs, incentives and disincentives, response-behavior, exit-options and the like.

There is some likeliness that the classical issues of macroeconomics will remain important on any DG-trajectory. Macroeconomic effects should not come about as a surprise to DG-policies. If so, macroeconomic modeling of DG-trajectories is mandatory. This is true for DG-4 trajectories *a fortiori*. If so, all variants of DG and especially DG-4 should take the following “classical” topics into close account: taxation, health services, social security, pension funding, rents, payment systems, immigration policies, international regimes, deficit spending, inflation rates, purchase power, infrastructure expenditures, criminal rates, international aid, and the like. At the moment, it remains unclear what kinds of reliable social security will (not) emerge in de-growth societies. There is even some likeliness that there will be more distributional conflicts, increasing harshness in social relations, more cultural divides, even political unrest or raising support for right-wing parties under DG-trajectories. I see DG-4 critically in any respect. To give an example: DG-4 must operate with negative discount rates because GDP shrinks. According to conventional economic wisdom, negative discount rates have a strong tendency toward deflation and under negative discount rates there is no Pareto-space in the future. Redistribution policies which are intended by DG-4 must operate under such conditions. The economic, societal and political consequences of a combination of deflation and redistribution might be very grim.

Rejecting DG-4, I have to assume that there is at least one variant of reformed and well-regulated capitalism that is compatible with DG-1, DG-2, and with DG-3 in the cultural interpretation just given. This variant could be the result of a “Green New Social Contract” which is not restricted to eco-efficiency (as most “Green New Deal” approaches are) but is more comprehensive in its regulatory scope.

Jackson rightly warns against the general fragility of DG [26]. DG-partisans should not underestimate the functions GDP-growth has had for societal life after Second World War. In these decades, growth of GDP was functional for social cohesion, for an increase in average wages till 1990, and for a system of taxation by which infrastructures could be established (universities, courts, road systems, theaters, and the like). It was functional for transforming the more rigid class societies into societies in which the middle class was mainstreamed (until the 1980s). Certainly this development took place in a historically unique period of cheap energy which now comes to an end [27]. To point at these politically relevant functions of growth for societal life at large does not deny destructive effects of growth-policies but wishes to emphasize that degrowth policies must be assessed with respect to such functions and infrastructure. It might be highly useful to model consequences of different DG-trajectories according to conventional macroeconomic wisdom. Without such strategies and assessment, the hope for a renewal of cultural life in solidarity, justice and liberation might be a noble dream that ignores a can of macro-economic worms.

3. Democratization within democracy

There can and should be no specific DG-theory of democracy. Theories of democracy must be more general than single political movements and parties which compete with each other in democratic modes of conflict regulation. Thus, theories of democracies must conceptually be neutral against specific political ideas and movements. What DG-partisans should look for is a theory of democracy which is theoretically independent from specific DG-assumptions but can give some meaning to the common qualifiers (“participatory”, “direct”, “local”, “substantial” and the like) by which DG-partisans often express their intuitions about the shortcomings of existing parliamentary democracy.

3.1. *European democracies*

There are different types of democracy. I leave aside all so called electorate democracies that only fulfill some minimal requirements as periodical elections of the state’s president. I focus on European political systems because the DG-movement is primarily a European movement at the moment. There is always a critical debate on the current state and the recent development of democracy in the national states that form the EU. Many authors see or fear the eroding and degrading effects of particular interests, pressure groups, economic globalization and a commercialized market-system on democracy. Mostly, the economic system is seen as a threat to democracy and I do not deny such tendencies. On the other side, it might be argued that the national states that form the EU still fulfill crucial yardsticks of democracy and that the EU, in a comparative global perspective, can be seen as the most democratic region on planet Earth. Seen from such comparative perspective [28], European parliamentary democracies have major advantages over other political systems (GUS, China, US). Quite often, civil societies in single EU-countries have been engaged in improving democracy toward some ideas of “real”, “direct” and “substantial” democracy. The growing DG-movement which attracts many young people all over Europe is a nice example that democracy is still alive.

Clearly, all and any diagnostic claims are essentially contested among politically engaged citizens just because they are in political ones in themselves. The argument I wish to make in this section does not rest on essentially contested diagnoses of the current state of democracy in single national states. The argument rests on one substantial premise (continuity of EU as a political project), some intuitions what democracy is all about, an outlook of democratization, a critique of Castoriadis, and a more elaborated concept of deliberative democracy.

The EU is a trans-national political governance framework that, in its current shape, derives its legitimacy from democratic elections in national states [29]. Despite EU's outlook as bureaucratic and economic "elite" project and despite anti-European popular movements it deserves political support against all backward tendencies toward nationalism. Given the European history, the EU is a success story. For the sake of argument I suppose that all variants of DG wish to continue the European Union as an ongoing political project. Supporters of DG-2 can point at the progressive role of EU in some areas of environmental policy making (as flora-fauna-habitat-directive and water-framework-directive) and at the environmental progress that was induced by the EU eastern enlargement. This substantial supposition in favor of the EU implies that most kinds of policy making that are relevant for DG are to be negotiated in a complex multi-layer system (EU, national and federal states, municipalities). This assumption is incompatible with the idea that democratic life is essentially local and direct. Given this, the idea of democracy must be conceived beyond the model of direct face-to-face interaction.

The idea of democracy comprehends the following concepts: (a) sovereignty of the people in law-making, (b) inclusion of all citizens as free and equal persons, (c) a comprehensive system of rights for all citizens, (d) uncoerced deliberation of public matters among citizens. These concepts can be taken as yardsticks by which the many shortcomings and pitfalls of single existing democracies can be identified. Democracies grant a comprehensive system of rights to all citizens, including rights to participate in democratic life and rights to have access to education, health care, court, open spaces, and the like. Democracies are committed to specific institutional arrangements, as parliaments whose members represent the people for a period of time, constitutional law, limits for majority voting, neutrality of the state against lifestyles, against religions and against comprehensive doctrines. Democracies protect cultural and political minorities and they provide fair chances for all political camps to come into government. Elections must be fair in several respects (free, equal, secret). Democracies encompass specific checks and balances against the misuse of political power. Public opinion forming might be manipulated by commercialized mass media but it is not directly distorted by state's authorities (censorship).¹¹ Democratic states fulfill continuous tasks as security, social welfare, environmental protection, financial support for cultural life and science, and the like. The idea of democracy conceives democracy as a commonly shared "*praxis*". Democracy, then, is far more than periodic elections and majority voting. It is a performative enterprise ("*praxis*") of the human being as a *zoon politicon*.¹² Democratic life is a non-diminutive good: one can have more of it if it is shared by many others. Without democrats, democracies are bound to fail.

Trivial to say, that democracy is never perfect and can be further improved. There are different theoretical orientations for further *democratization* within existing democracy. Such outlook on further democratization does not wish to compromise the fragile achievements of existing democracies. This outlook on democratization should be acceptable for all variants of DG irrespectively of the many contested assumptions on the current state of European democracies. As far as I understand the political philosophy of DG (including DG-4), it is oriented toward such concepts of democratization. Thus, it seems prudent to take a closer look at political philosophies that give theoretical support for an outlook on democratization (OD).

Without further debate, I assume that neither system theoretical approaches [30] nor economic theories of democracy¹³ can provide such OD. But what about authors that can be seen as political philosophers whose writings are attractive to OD? From my academic background in critical theory ("Frankfurt School"), I see both Herbert Marcuse and Cornelius Castoriadis as such authors. Marcuse's writings [32] have been very influential on the revolts after 1968 and they deserve fresh attention from DG-4 activists, since they defend non-compliance with the system and rebellion against it. Since Castoriadis' writings are more present in the current DG debates I focus on Castoriadis' ideas on politics and democracy taking his *opus magnum* "*L'institution imaginaire de la société*" [25] as source of reference.

Reading closely the second part of this book one can hardly overlook that Castoriadis jumps from his more Aristotelian ideas of politics as *praxis* into a more Marxian outlook of a genuine "revolutionary project". At a crucial point, Castoriadis draws a distinction between (a) politics that treats persons as objects and tries to manipulate them effectively and (b) politics that is oriented toward the full autonomy of persons as political agents. Castoriadis takes autonomy as supreme value of human history. His multi-dimensional value-concept has many aspects with respect to volition, morals, economics, politics, culture, truth-orientation and the like. Castoriadis, then, dubs this autonomy-oriented approach "revolutionary politics". Now a dilemma occurs: either (first lemma) all OD that are oriented toward *some* aspects of autonomy, as political autonomy of citizens in a democratic culture, fall under the concept of revolutionary politics. This broadens the meaning of "revolutionary" to an extent that all theories of deliberative democracy fall under this category. On this lemma all Habermasians are, by definition, revolutionaries. This clearly undermines the idea of revolution and it is incompatible with Castoriadis' claim that there was hardly any such a thing as a revolutionary approach yet. Or (second lemma) only revolutionary politics that aims at a radical shift of current societies and its economic structure is to be regarded as truly autonomy-oriented. This means that revolutionary politics must target all aspects of autonomy holistically into account. The idea of autonomy, then, is exclusively passed over to revolutionaries.

The sections on the objective and subjective roots of the revolutionary "Entwurf" (to quote this Heideggerian [33] term in German) strongly indicate that Castoriadis takes the second lemma. To him, the objective roots are the basic contradictions of capitalism while the subjective roots are based on some politically shaped desires (wishes, longings) to live in a different

¹¹ The special case of Berlusconi's nasty media-political system is not to be discussed here.

¹² This concept does not rely on an idealization of Athen's ancient democracy which was highly "agonistic".

¹³ The best analysis on James Buchanan's economic theory of democracy is to be found in T. Petersen, *Individuelle Freiheit und allgemeiner Wille* [31].

society, to do meaningful and unalienated work, to be fully informed, not to live in competitive hierarchies, to cooperate non-violently, and the like. Parallels with current DG-3,4 claims are evident. One element in this set of revolutionary desires is the wish to participate directly in all (!) affairs that affect one's own life and the course society takes. Taking the wording seriously, this implies a radical variant of direct democracy. This OD is hard to reconcile with representative models of parliamentary democracy in a multi-layers system of professionalized policy making. Castoriadis seems to assume that only such OD can overcome the concept of manipulative strategic politics he rejects. If so, the idea of political autonomy is intrinsically tied to this OD. As far as I am familiar with his writings, Castoriadis has never elaborated this OD to a substantial theory of democracy. His rejection of Soviet communism is no substitute for such theory.

This reading of Castoriadis implies that his political philosophy does not meet the requirement of independence from specific DG-claims. To put it bluntly: Castoriadis might be attractive for DG-3 and, of course, DG-4 partisans but his political philosophy is full of assumptions which must be contested among all those citizens in existing democracies which are not committed to DG, not to speak of professional policy-makers that negotiate policies in a multi-layered system ranging from international regimes down to municipalities. As we shall see in the next section, a more sober Habermasian framework has more to offer.

3.2. *Habermas on democracy*

Habermas has outlined a theory of deliberative democracy which is a variant of OD [34]. The framework of discourse ethics is specified by Habermas to a theory of deliberative democracy. Habermas claims that human rights and democracy presuppose each other. The argument implies that there is no democracy without human rights and human rights can be fully performed only in a democratic political system. After having substantiated this (dialectic) argument, Habermas presents a complex and robust model of the political sphere that accepts both the realities and achievements of liberal democracies but also preserves some critical ideals from republican traditions (from Rousseau to Hannah Arendt). This model entails (a) the core of the political system (CP) of existing liberal Western democracies (parliament, government, administration, supreme courts, headquarters of parties, and the like), (b) the soft communicative power of deliberating civil society (CS), and (c) intermediate zones (IZ) in which NGO's, boards of scientific policy counseling, academia, concerned scientists, free lancers, pressure groups, and other agents propose ideas on policy making. The analytic model of existing democracies can be structured as D: (CP, IZ, CS).

Single citizens and NGOs are to make public use of political reason within a commonly shared deliberative sphere ("Öffentlichkeit"). Civil society performs itself as a Kantian "Publikum" [35]. Normatively speaking, it is the task of civil society to hold both expectations and pressure high on professional politicians but civil society does not reject professionalized policy making as such. Civil society has no intention to replace CP. The ideas, interpretations, and proposals of civil society shall rather infiltrate the different knots on the peripheries (IZ) and come closer to the core of the political system in the course of time. The uncoercive force of reason takes its time but is never lacking. (Some patience with democratic processes clearly conflicts with the sense of urgency that many DG-activists share.) As a matter of fact, the core of the political system cannot ignore the claims which are raised within a civil society in the longer run, but it is forced to react to them by means of political programs. At the core of political systems there are professional experts for legislation processes, economic assessment, and instrumental and financial implementation of policies. Such expertise is not repugnant in itself. Democracy would be overdemanding even to highly engaged citizens without the routine work of processing policies as it is done by parliament, government, administration, diplomacy, and the like. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a complex parliamentary and governmental system. It is open for debate whether, and if so, how the political core should be augmented by further democratization (as referenda on specific matters).

In the intermediate zones between core and civil society, there is space for concerned scientists, investigating journalists, NGO-leaders, campaigners, engaged intellectuals, dissenting voters, advocates for specific topics, and the like. This space with its many specific arenas, writings, and media enables persons to take the role of critical intellectuals which contribute to political debates. Here, there is room for engaged intellectuals which like to become experts in specific social and environmental matters without adopting the biases of objectifying science. Intellectuals point at the biases of scientific experts and voice will be given to lay persons directly. In these zones, there is even room for direct involvement of citizens (citizen's juries) by which an impact on politics can be established [36].¹⁴

This model is realistic as far as it describes and explains political life in existing democracies quite well but it also has critical force because it identifies prospects for OD under the yardsticks of deliberative democracy that are ultimately rooted in discourse ethics and in the very practice of arguing. The interplay between a vibrant civil society, engaged intermediate agents, experts, and professional politicians makes democracy a commonly shared project with many frontiers, outlooks, and horizons. This overall network must be used continuously by citizens if it is to be kept intact. The quality of a democratic system cannot be located at specific nodes of such network. Even the metaphor of "democracy being alive" can be reconstructed by this Habermasian model.

Under this model, we should not commit fallacies of misplaced concreteness by pointing at nasty politicians, single laws, lobbies, too many votes for right-wing parties and the like. Democracy is, of course, fragile. If civil society becomes tired of

¹⁴ See also Renn et al. [37] and Smith, Wales [38].

politics, if intermediate zones become occupied and controlled by commercialized and manipulative mass media and lobbies, if policy makers cynically adopt the schemes of commercial advertisement for electorate campaigns, if intellectuals escape in the lofty realm of postmodern aesthetics, if dissenting votes are marginalized, existing democracies may be compromised in the longer run. Such tendencies will result in a kind of, say, minimal decent formal democracy dominated by cynical elites. A Habermasian concept of deliberative democracies is by no means blind against those tendencies but it also sees the strong forces in civil societies that resist them. Moreover, this concept gives a reason why citizens should hold high expectations against persons which are entitled to act as representatives of the people.

3.3. *Deliberative democracy and variants of degrowth*

Seen from the perspective of DG-1, some states (as France and Germany) are now doing some critical assessment on GDP-growth within the political system while the DG-1-orientation has taken foothold in the intermediate zones. The political debate about GDP is now taking momentum in some EU countries and DG-1 should actively contribute to this debate. There are realistic outlooks that DG-1 can be mainstreamed in single EU countries and can replace EU's growth-oriented Lisbon strategy by new measures of economic prosperity within some years. This optimism is supported by the matter of fact that there are hardly any strong intellectual defenders of GDP left on the battlefield. The paradigm of GDP-growth has grown old.

Seen from the perspective of DG-2, there have been several success stories in EU with respect to the reduction of air pollution, water pollution, waste, side effects of traffic, and chemicals in the environment. Environmental issues have been mainstreamed in recent years. Even in the critical case of climate change, the EU has been the forerunner. The necessities for adaptation to climate change can be used as a window of opportunity for restoring nature. DG-2 activists will continue mainstreaming "green" ideas in civil society hoping that political reforms can take more speed. Without downplaying the problem of urgency with respect to climate change and nature conservation, general political constellations in current democracies are not inimical against strong environmental reforms. Those reforms could be framed by a concept of strong sustainability, as it has been proposed elsewhere [12,39–41]. This comes close to John Dryzek's idea on imaginative reformism under a concept of strong sustainability [42]. After having harvested the low-hanging fruits of technological innovations DG-2 turns to the more harder fields of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, climate policies and the like. DG-2 must also address the problem that dirty industries have been shifted to Southern countries. DG-2 can do so by technological and financial support for leaps toward environmental reforms in those countries. This outlook does not take the Environmental Kuznets Curve as an economic law but it supposes that states can make environmental policies that make this curve represent environmental reality.

Seen from a DG-3 perspective, open societies are not hostile to cultural change. Given political majorities, some incentives and support for DG-3 can be set by means of legislation within the rule of law. Fields of interests are gender relations, education, food styles, public spaces and transport systems, and the like. A combination of sufficient and convivial lifestyles, new patterns of mutual recognition, queer practices, new attitudes and supportive political reforms are within reach. Conjunctions of such DG-1, DG-2, and DG-3 prospects are close to concepts of deliberative environmental democracy [43] as we will see in the next section.

But what about DG-4? To be honest: I really do not know. Perhaps, DG-4 activists will reject the Habermasian concept in general. Perhaps, they wish to give the terms by which DG-4-democracy must be qualified, different meanings. Perhaps, they really want to allocate political competencies to local levels. Perhaps, they have guiding political images that go beyond liberal representative democracies. Because I do neither wish to speculate nor unfairly construe a straw-man, I pass these many problems and puzzles to DG-4-theorists and turn to some ideas how the concept of deliberative democracy can be further enriched and improved. The following subsection specifies how some elements from recent debates in environmental democracy can be added to the concept of deliberative democracy.

3.4. *Adding elements to deliberative democracy*

There is much literature on environmental democracy which is useful for an enrichment of deliberative democracy with some elements that are attractive to supporters of most variants of DG.

Sagoff [44] has argued that citizens are entitled to endorse strong traditions and deep cultural and religious commitments. The cultural values of nature are emphasized by Sagoff in this respect. Citizens might be committed to particular cultural landscapes, to ideals of urban life, to aesthetics in architecture and city planning, to regional identities, to traditions in nature conservation, and the like. Citizenship entails not only Kantian morals but it also entails Hegelian "ethos" ("Sittlichkeit"). To encourage citizens to articulate particular cultural commitments within democratic life is clearly ambivalent since strong traditions may display hostility against each other but traditions also provide value-orientations that may counterbalance narrow economic cost-benefit-ratios. Such articulations of traditions are not restricted to scientific types of arguments but can make use of narratives, poetry, testimonies and other types of embodied communicative reason [45].

There are several proposals of how participatory settings might be established at the intersection of civil society and political sphere [46]. Citizens should be enabled to take an active role in opinion forming, judging policy options, and designing policies. Meanwhile, many instances of participatory settings have been performed and assessed [47]. The fairness of the overall setting and the neutrality of the organization are crucial determinants for success. Generally, citizens display a

high degree of political and moral prudence within those settings [38]. The Habermasian model is to be augmented by participatory arrangements in the intermediate zones. Thus, variants of DG could become topics of such citizen's juries. To supporters of DG, it might be informative to see how citizens comment on such proposals.

As it has been said, democracy is a fragile and risky mode of political life which proceeds without any metaphysical security system. Ultimately, there are no guards of democracy than the citizens themselves. Clearly, there are political camps that are hostile to "green" deliberative OD. Carter has proposed a model that makes us sensitive for supportive and hostile political dynamics [48]. "Carter's" approach can structure the threats against democracy that stem from vested interests, inegalitarian social relations, "hard" technologies and the like. Thus, whoever supports a conjunction of DG and OD cannot be neutral against such hostile dynamics.

Martinez-Alier [49] has argued that sometimes even an intensification and exacerbation of political conflicts "within Gandhian limits" can be seen as helpful for further democratization. This idea must not be restricted to environmental conflicts in the Global South. Deliberative democracy does not reject non-violent civil disobedience (NVCD) to be performed at specific non-trivial occasions. Clearly, a concept of deliberative democracy puts moral and political constraints and requirements on NVCD. NVCD-activities must be strictly non-violent and have to respect basic rights of opponents and of bystanders. NVCD actions must be able to be substantiated on moral grounds. NVCD activists should not profit by such actions personally. They are to be restricted to some minor period of time and should leave property intact. If such constraints are respected, NVCD belongs to democratic life. In an old German volume on "*Ziviler Ungehorsam im Rechtsstaat*" there is a contribution of Habermas in which he argued that a democratic culture should neither horrify nor penalize NVCD activities [50]. NVCD should be rather perceived as intrinsic component of a self-confident democratic culture.

4. Final result

There are reasons for three out of four variants of de-growth and for further democratization within democracy. All DG-variants and -strategies should fulfill the requirement that they should not compromise existing democracies and the EU and, moreover, might provide plausible OD. Seen from the DG-angle, concepts for OD should be, in principle, compatible with DG-1, DG-2, and DG-3. The concept of Habermasian deliberative democracy fulfills all these requirements. Strong cultural traditions (*T*), a widening idea of articulation (*A*), active participation of citizens (*P*), sensitivity for hostile dynamics (*H*), and a permission for constrained NVCD (*D*) should be seen as crucial components *C* of further enriched deliberative democracy that most DG-supporters may find attractive (*C*: {*T*, *A*, *P*, *H*, *D*}).

Thus, we have reached some result. The conceptual relationship can now be determined. One should (sign: !) support the following conjoined and concrete (from: *concretere*) position *P*:

!*P* : (DG-1 & DG-2 & DG-3) & (OD : CP, IZ, CS) & (C : {*T*, *A*, *P*, *H*, *D*})

To repeat this position in ordinary language: we should adopt a critique of GDP-growth (DG-1), a concept of strong sustainability (DG-2), and a revitalization of culture (DG-3). We should have an orientation for further democratization (OD) which takes into account the core of the political system (CP), the intermediate zones (IZ) and civil society (CS). Additionally, we should enrich existing democracy by several components, as strong cultural traditions, a widening idea of articulation and speech, active participation, sensitivity for hostile dynamics and threats to democracy, and permission for constrained civil disobedience. Of course, this position will, if adopted, deeply affect our patterns of mutual recognition in a beneficial way.

I see the following advantages (*A*) of this position *P*. As far as I can see, there are no inconsistencies in between the single components of this conjunction (*A*-1). There are no implications that run counter to general moral convictions. Thus, *P* is in reflective equilibrium with our overall moral belief system (*A*-2). Beside its normative force *P* can serve as a scheme which is helpful in structuring specific debates (*A*-3).¹⁵ Accusations against eco-dictatorship become pointless (*A*-4). This position should be critically compared to conjunctions of DG-4 with concepts of democracy that supporters of DG-4 wish to propose. Supporters of DG-4 should, indeed, feel challenged. I regard this pressure on DG-4 as both fair and advantageous (*A*-5). Political debates about variants of capitalism can and should be performed in detail from within *P*. Who adopts *P* has reasons to welcome serious and open debates on political economics. In this respect, however, political and economic prudence and some risk-aversion and skepticism against utopias might be more helpful for the DG movement than radical chic.

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¹⁵ Debates on traditions of sufficient lifestyles are now a debate on "T & DG-3". Participatory settings about GDP are now "P & DG-1". Analyses which pressure groups are barriers to strong sustainability are "H & DG-2" - and so on.

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