



How to rebuild democracy, re-thinking degrowth

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ABSTRACT

Can the degrowth project contribute to rediscovering the meaning of democracy? Can the establishment of a real democracy lead to building a degrowth society? And last, has the project of a “democratic degrowth” a real chance to succeed, from a political point of view? If not, how should degrowth be re-thought to foster democracy? These are the questions entertained in this opinion essay. My thesis is that the currently dominant formulation of degrowth and its relationship to democracy are highly problematic. The degrowth proposal reproduces a central paradox of modernity concerning democracy: degrowth does not aspire to restore collective “*legein*”; it only works like a “*teukein*”, offering techniques that will allow the human species merely to “stay alive”. Moreover, there is a political problem: while the need for degrowth is presented as very urgent, the tactic for spreading the idea is one of an elitist strategy of voluntary simplicity, which can only work very slowly. The moralistic ideal of voluntary simplicity runs counter to the dominant de-modernized human subject that is becoming prevalent in our societies; as a result, degrowth cannot connect to real social processes and to the emotions of the large part of the population. To make degrowth feasible and to restore democracy, we need to deflate modern subjectivity. Drawing inspiration from Mediterranean anthropologies, I propose a foundation of degrowth on a human subject of “de-thinking” and I discuss the political pathways for such an alternative degrowth project.

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Most degrowth thinkers and advocates assume that degrowth and democracy are co-substantial and go hand in hand toward a shared destiny [1,2]. Moreover, they argue that the two processes can be mutually reinforced by their alliance: a degrowth society will lead to the rebirth of democracy; and a real democratic society will naturally choose degrowth. Indeed, the majority of the degrowth movement, scholars and activists alike, endorse the paradigm of a “radical”, direct democracy of proximity. The hope is to construct a grassroots alternative which does not include “the taking of the Winter Palace”, but which expands through the amplification of the democratic ideal [3–5]. In relation to these assumptions, this essay is asking: can the degrowth project indeed contribute to rediscover a real democracy? Vice versa, could the establishment of a real democracy lead to building a degrowth society? And apart from that, has the project of a “democratic degrowth”, in its current dominant formulation, a serious chance to succeed, from a realistic, political point of view? If, as I will argue, it does not, how should it be re-thought to foster a real democracy and a kind of degrowth that could indeed generate an alternative society?

This essay proceeds as follows. First, the assumed compatibility of degrowth and democracy is questioned. In the second section a definition of real democracy is offered, and the case is made that degrowth reproduces the central paradox of modernity concerning democracy, what I will call the “*legein* paradox”. In Section 3 I criticize the “voluntary simplicity” path to degrowth questioning its social and political feasibility. Finally, in Section 4 I attempt to revive degrowth and democracy,

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by re-defining the former as a degrowth of the modern human subject. Some preliminary insights are offered on a renewed degrowth strategy drawing inspiration from the Mediterranean region.

1. Are degrowth and democracy compatible?

The meanings of democracy and degrowth should not be taken for granted. They have to be explicitly specified. But even before this, and just from the outset, and by looking at those superficial arguments that state that they are co-substantial, one can easily detect some evident discrepancies, without the need to go into deeper semantic, political and theoretical study. In short, the compatibility between degrowth and democracy is far from assured. Let me explain.

1.1. The technical bias

The simple framing of the argument in support of degrowth raises several problems. It assumes that there is a crisis of environmental balance, a crisis of resources, which endangers human existence or, at least, it endangers the perpetuation of the current development pattern [6]. As Latouche, the most well-known exponent of degrowth, puts it: “a radical change is an absolute necessity (...) to avoid a brutal and tragic catastrophe” [7]. This formulation of the challenge produces a technical bias, inconsistent with the idea of people’s sovereignty collective sovereignty that is at the heart of a real notion of democracy. This bias stems from the fact that since the ecological crisis cannot be seen with the naked eye, expert knowledge is a pre-requisite for its mere “recording”. The average citizen, apart from the trouble, more or less disruptive, of general pollution, has no means in her disposition to say that the world is in fact in danger. She can only trust what the experts declare. But after having the experts define the problem, it is almost inevitable to ask the same people who have detected it to take the lead for its resolution. It is totally unrealistic to imagine that the experts will limit themselves in saying how things are, or neutrally draw the alternative escape scenarios, allowing then people to autonomously take a decision. The intrusiveness of technical knowledge (which, of course, is inescapable, to some extent) in the realm of action and regulation is almost innate. But it dispossesses people of their sovereignty and their freedom of opinion concerning their lives. These are determined according to an icy *diktat*, with the chrism of objectivity, issued by Science. Only those experts, who are capable of seeing things “from above” can judge the legitimacy of the life models chosen by common people.

Furthermore a basic problem with this view of a pending catastrophe, is that, if the ecological crisis were to be metabolized in the collective consciousness as a shared “reality”, the destiny of any socio-political course would then be predetermined: any kind of society, of co-existence, of environmental governance and of organization of our relationship with planet Earth (regardless of its degree of democratization) would in principle have to seek the same result: “ecological compatibility”. This governing fundamental principle is an a-political axiom, which is supposed to hold priority over any subsequent discussion (more or less democratic) on the idea of a good society. It is a principle to be upheld under all circumstances; all ideas must obey to that final result. Then, one wonders, if a technocratic or non-democratic regime is more suitable to deal with an emergency situation, why not choose this instead of a less-effective democratic one? [8]. An anti-democratic drift is clearly plausible in the pursuit of ecological compatibility.

1.2. Why a localist frame necessarily generates an ecological democracy?

A potential contradiction arises also in relation to the localist fetishism that is spread among many degrowth proponents. In degrowth literature, the local dimension is not only a space for the reconstruction of social ties and lost DIY production practices; but also is the main “institutional” container and the preferable scale of application of the degrowth alternative. Latouche [7], for example, retrieves the “bioregion” concept of Panikkar [9]: a “homogeneous” territorial entity, where biophysical elements (plants, animals, water, etc.) are linked to the history of people in a harmonious embrace. The geographical extent of such bioregions is open, ranging from the “small district republic” to the municipality or the inter-district. Anyway, Latouche states, it should not exceed the threshold of thirty thousand inhabitants, beyond which the spectre of alienating depersonalization that now poisons the growth society will return. For degrowth advocates, the local dimension provides two conditions without which a democracy is unmanageable and deprived of sense: the personalization of citizens’ relations (it is the idea of “grassroots democracy” developed by Fotopoulos [5]) and the embedding of institutions within a specific cultural context, achievable only at a local scale. Of course the proposed bio-units are not supposed to be closed, autistic monads, but connected to one another within bottom-up confederations. The supposed result would be a democratic pluri-verse of cultures.

Even assuming that it is possible to find, under the alienated crust of global flows, some territories spontaneously gifted by the harmony yearned by Panikkar in his idea of “bioregion”, this is not the only problem. Democracy, in fact, is not a universal concept. It is not a neutral dress that can cover any socio-cultural body. Real democracy structurally undermines any inherited symbolic, cultural enframing. And vice versa, most of known cultural traditions reveal a deeply a-democratic constitution (if not anti-democratic).

This highlights a basic contradiction: the local Utopia at the center of the degrowth proposal is unbearable to the same idea of democracy that it purports to be based upon. If the demon of democratic autonomy were to be unleashed, it is an illusion to think that it would be possible to confine it within any natural limits (territorial, moral or even “thematic”). For example, why would the territorial units remain within the size suggested by degrowthers (thirty thousand people)? Why, if

they live in a democratic community, could people not choose to go beyond this threshold? Who would have the power to sanction any overrunnings? Obviously, the localization proposal makes sense only if the free movement of persons between the local communities was to be drastically reduced; otherwise the socio-cultural holism needed for self-production and personalization would not make sense. But why should a free citizen, residing in an increasingly democratic arena, choose to stay put in one's own community instead of, as it is reasonable, prefer to move discovering other places and other people?

The contradiction is even more glaring if one looks at the underlying social values of the degrowth proposal. See, for example, the call for "ecological democracy" which is always mentioned in one and the same breath with degrowth. The intent to attach adjectives to the word "democracy" is wishful thinking similar to the exercise of attaching adjectives to "development" ("sustainable", "autonomous", "social", etc.). Why would a democratic and independent community always choose the highest standards of ecological protection at the expense of other objectives that it could deem as most important? Who would sanction the betrayal of the ecological values? Who would ensure that citizens comply with a culture of sobriety, prefer small shops to shopping centers, small buildings to skyscrapers, and all the rest? [10]

Degrowth advocates claim that a given political and territorial architecture (the localist one) necessarily generates a specific political agenda, a direct (ecological) democracy one. I argue instead that we delude ourselves if we think that once a community is empowered and democratized, it will land voluntarily onto the "good" values of sobriety, *phronesis*, "small is beautiful" and so on. This is an "ontology of spontaneity" which reappears in several versions of degrowth. As in the myth of the *bon sauvage* by Rousseau, the assumption is that "letting men be", in a regime of perfect democratic immanence, they will always pursue the "good" and the "fair". Ergo, any tendency to deterioration can be exclusively attributed to the influence of vulgar or evil "powers", to be annihilated. And while there are no formidable trajectories that could confirm the reliability of this ontology, there is a "really existing localism" that has so far produced a lot of night patrols against immigrants and prostitutes, as well as various episodes of setting fire to gypsies campsites, in order to ensure the hygiene of "lovely communities".

In short, if our project is indeed one of a real, radical democracy, we should not then complain if the process leads to the loss of a "shared vision", an irrationality of exchanges, or an incompatibility of production processes with environmental balances and so on. If the institutional framework of a democratic mentality is to really have a primacy over any value constraint, then the perverse effects it generates are not a "betrayal of its origins" but its perfect fulfillment. Degrowth cannot be the foundation for a project of real democracy for the same reason that "growth" cannot be the foundation. Both are "proposals" that can get lost together with the thousands options that make up the melting pot of a democratic regime. Growth and degrowth, in this sense, lie in the same paradigm of the autonomous subject: their validity is tied to historical contingencies and none can claim the throne of constitutional dogma.

I conclude therefore that degrowth cannot foster a democratic order; if something, it threatens democracy. And vice versa, within a democratic framework it cannot be taken for granted that degrowth will become a value to be pursued.

2. Degrowth and the "legein paradox"

2.1. The neutralitarian regime

What do I mean by "real democracy"? The premise of modernity is that humans are granted universal access to "sense" and that they are expected to live their lives based on it. The dominant ideology rejects any form of dependence [11]. Individuals are invited to autonomously go and search for the truth, find the sense of life, shape their lives and the frame around them basing on the values they autonomously choose. However, only an infinitesimal part of the world – even of each person's little world – is manageable by the person itself. The most powerful sources of influence that shape the world are invisible or they are out of any single person's control.

Here enters the notion of democracy.

Following Colin Crouch, "democracy thrives when there are major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people to actively participate, through discussion and autonomous organizations, in shaping the agenda of public life, and when they are actively using these opportunities" [12].

The more the opportunities to participate in the definition of the social system are the more a political regime can be defined as democratic. The opportunities to participate in the construction of a common environment are to be shared equally among the members of the community, elites should not be able to influence public life at the expense of the majority. Under this conception, a political regime is more democratic to the extent that the context variables that affect individual lives are consciously determined by the citizens themselves through collective discussion, and despite exogenous "blind" forces that may not be controllable. A political regime is (more) democratic insofar as common life is the output of a collective exercise of *legein*.

According to Castoriadis [13], *legein* refers to the deployment of words, reasoning, argumentation, speech and everything suitable to represent reality and interpret it as a whole, giving it a sense. *Legein* means also linkage, connection, the search for relations between men, and between men and things (environment, etc.), in order to infer an overall and consistent dynamics for a system as a whole. Democracy, hence, is the collective construction of sense.

However, the problem is that freedom in building sense necessarily leads to a multiplication of possible visions: potentially, each individual carries her own sense. A modern, democratic human collective could not shape itself sharing only one vision, because this shared vision will always be contestable, never adhering to the vision brought by each one.

The consequences of this problem is that in modernity, the *legein* is confined in a purely expressive, rhetorical and intimate domain: everyone is free to express his unique vision, but no one can claim to implement it. This is a central

paradox: modernity is the age in which everyone is encouraged to go out and search for “sense”, but also everyone is prevented from translating it into a collective construction. So the implementation of any political vision is structurally prevented by the primacy granted to individuals in defining and pursuing their own idea of “good”. Under modernity, the recognition of micro-freedom becomes a veto to the great (collective) freedom.

Public authority is expected by definition to be neutral, passive in the face of the infinite variety of visions carried by each citizen. After all, none of these visions can expect to be implemented involving all the community, given that each one is assumed as carrying her own legitimate vision that necessarily conflicts with that of others. A “neutralitarian regime” is generated to avoid this paradox of *legein*. In the name of autonomy, the main structural determinants of individual lives end up remaining totally untouched.

It is out of this “neutralitarian regime” that the primacy of *teukein* springs out. According to Magatti, the history of modernity is marked by the progressive decline of *legein*, in favor of *teukein* [14].

Teukein refers to action, to the means for intervening over the world, pursuing goals which are useful to human welfare. It refers, in short, to technique. The development of the Promethean ability to do things, to act over the world, is another *leitmotif* of modernity, that moves parallel to that of *legein*. Given that *legein* can never be realized, *teukein* derives its legitimacy by the strength it demonstrates “on the ground”, by the simple fact that one technique works better than another. If one technique increases men’s capacity to do things, more than any other, it is to be accepted and espoused by all: because it enhances human autonomy and the opportunity to build the world in accordance with one’s wishes. De facto, *teukein* takes the place of *legein* in building social life. Instead of a collective decision on how to shape the world, we simply adopt the technical system and its self-referential logic. It seems that neutrality improves individual autonomy and citizen empowerment. But clearly the structures that frame social life are not the output of a collective decision: they are the result of the technical development dynamics. *Teukein* rules the world, although the pretence is that it never affects the construction of sense in social life, as this in theory should be only the spontaneous result of the interaction between individuals, who are supposed to be sovereigns in devising and implementing their own life projects. The a-teleological character of democratic regime foster the primacy of *teukein*.

Under these conditions, the aim of politics becomes the mere preservation of life: “life for life’s sake”. Politics foster the growth of the “organic” life of citizens (“growth for growth”), together with the administrative control of their movements [15]. Life is preserved (or “grown”) in order to allow the human beings to do everything they wish with it. Growth is then simply an expression of the modern principle of neutrality: it is ‘rightly’ indifferent to any human purpose, aiming only to increase the substantial opportunities of everyone to choose and achieve their own goals. In this sense, the principle of “growth for growth” is equivalent to the principle of “life for life’s sake”.

Given this dynamics, does degrowth, in its current and dominant formulation, contribute to dispel the neutralitarian regime and the primacy of *teukein*? Does it contribute to overcome the *legein* paradox, to promote the collective discourse in determining the features of the public sphere?

I don’t see how. In my opinion, degrowth itself remains trapped in the paradox. It remains stuck in the path of “neutralism”, life for life’s sake, *teukein*’s primacy.

Waving the threat of catastrophe (“Degrowth or collapse”, as Bonaiuti asserts [10,16], paraphrasing the old motto “socialism or barbarism”), degrowth evokes nothing but the necessity of setting up a world compatible with our species life, without saying nothing explicit about the sense of such a life, other than in a cursory manner and by relation (e.g. arguments of the type “once life becomes less wasteful of energy, it will be more beautiful to live”, a hypothesis that waits to be substantiated). I argue therefore that degrowth too is a “technique”. It is not concerned with the sense of life. It only pays attention at the conditions for life reproduction. In this way, degrowth meets the paradox of democracy. Degrowth does not worry about the restoring of *legein*, but it works like a *teukein*, merely permitting the species and its members to stay alive. Yes, the strategy changes from growth to degrowth, but the goal remains the same: life, beyond all “sense”. The neutralist scheme is fully confirmed. Yet a community can only be “really democratic” if it debates sense and if it allows for a collective creation of an idea of the “good society”, concretely implementing it. It is not democratic if all that it does is bent on the goal of preserving its own existence. From this point of view, degrowth makes no difference for democracy compared to growth. It has nothing to say, in itself, about what constitutes a “good society”.

2.2. Searching for survival and well-being

The indifference of the degrowth proposal to the restoration of *legein* is clear also when one looks at the sociological component of degrowth’s criticism to western culture. The pursuit of material wealth, degrowthers assert, has led to an erosion of social ties. An increase of “well-having” always corresponds to a decrease in “well-being” [17,18]. I am not that interested in the truth of this postulate, but rather in its paradoxical construction. I argue that contrary to its professed intention, this formulation of degrowth does not question Western lifestyles and it leaves untouched the utilitarian conception of life, which is based on the unlimited, endless search for “feeling better”. It is entirely tautological to say, as Serge Latouche does, that:

“It is necessary to separate the improvement of individual conditions and the quantitative growth of material production. In other words, we need to decrease ‘well-having’, measured by economic indicators, and to improve really lived ‘well-being’” [7].

At the basis of the dominant degrowth vision one still finds the pursuit of well-being by everyone, the increase of the chances to do and be what everyone wants. There is not a common political project, just the amplification of a general enabling *teukein*. Likewise, much of the programmatic and political side of the degrowth movement is nothing more than a list of what we can call “survival techniques”, indifferent to the meaning of life.

The degrowth proposal therefore remains trapped in the same paradigm of growth and development, although in a reversed form. The goal is always “survival” and/or well-being. If a few years ago this was to be obtained by pushing the accelerator on growth (and thereby increasing the prosperity chances for all), today it should be pursued by choosing degrowth, so that the environment does not crack. Degrowth remains stuck within the paradigm of neutrality, aiming at biological survival, regardless of the sense of life.

I conclude therefore that degrowth, in its current and dominant formulation, does not hold intrinsic properties suitable to resolve the basic crisis of democracy, i.e. the impasse of collective sovereignty over the world, and does not counteract the pervasiveness of *teukein*. On the contrary, degrowth is a new mutation of the hegemony of technique and it leaves the problem of collective sense and democracy unresolved. Degrowth reinforces the primacy of the individual and her well-being proper of modernity (generating, in turn, the primacy of “life for life”) which, paradoxically, is precisely the one that prevents the deployment of collective sovereignty.

3. Why degrowth and democracy are yet to come

As specified above, the degrowth proposal is decreed as necessary on the basis of technical/scientific knowledge. The need for social change is justified by an external judge.

This is a manifestation of the recurring fault of “critical thinking” (in this case of degrowth advocates) as opposed to what I, after others, have called radical, or more precisely “rooted” thought [19,20]. In critical thinking, the operator of the criticism autonomously composes a set of “right” values, principles and ideals, which then he compares with the observed reality, revealing, and thus condemning, all deviations from her idealized model. Rooted thought, instead, settles inside on-going social processes, it catches sights of their potential evolutions and it is from there that it gives birth to its proposals of social change. The degrowth project risks being critical but not rooted. It condemns itself to dwell in a moralistic sphere, without connecting to the flesh and soul of real social actors.

This inherent fault is reflected on the political strategies put forward by degrowthers to implement the project.

3.1. A voluntarist approach

The main strategy put forward is the so-called “voluntary simplicity” [21] approach.¹ It belongs to a path of political action that leads activists to secede from the public arena where the majority of people lie, in order to build a small world together with those who only share the same values and visions. Obeying to this path, an elite, most “aware” of the necessity of degrowth, will give the good example, staging degrowth practices, here and now, without waiting to “take the power”. Degrowthers promote simplicity experiences, collective and personal, engage in voluntary simplicity circles, found small degrowth or other eco-communities, all done in the hope that their practical virtues will stand out so obviously and infect the rest of the citizens, those “poor ones” who are still unaware. This action is not political in the traditional sense of the term. Degrowthers do not pretend to participate in the competition for the conquest of institutions. They act immediately in the social domain, giving concrete proof of the feasibility of a degrowth alternative. What chances of success does this strategy have?

First, there is an obvious problem with it: the need for degrowth is presented as something very urgent, but spreading it by an elitist strategy of voluntary simplicity can only be a slow process, and this is recognized by degrowth advocates. It is the least inconsistent to cry for the absolute urgency of degrowth and then choose a path which in itself promises to be long, difficult and uncertain (at best) in its outcome. Of course, many degrowth authors propose these experiences of voluntary simplicity as a gymnasium for a post-disaster period. Simplicity or low-carbon experiences, such as the Transition Towns, are advocated as survival exercises that will be copied once the announced catastrophe finally arrives. But, paraphrasing Keynes, “after the catastrophe we will all be dead”.

Degrowth supporters and theorists do not care so much to embody and relate their arguments to actual, existent social and historical processes, i.e. to match them with the will, the values and the attitudes of the existing social actors. But in my view, it is very difficult to fight the “growth for growth” regime without recognizing fully the hegemony that its imaginary has on the masses, touching on their deepest emotions and activating their dearest desires. This kind of “aristocratic ethics”

¹ The criticism that follows below applies less on the part of the degrowth movement that approaches degrowth from an environmental conflicts perspective [22,23], and which has as its starting point the social conflicts and movements against development projects carried on by public entities or private companies. While this is a more “rooted” approach, an important question is whether those who fight against these projects are actually fighting for degrowth. The risk in the conflicts-approach is to repeat the typical error of Marxist theorists who saw in workers mobilizations against poor working conditions a fight for communism. Similarly, it is very likely that those engaged today in environmental conflicts do not really fight for a degrowth society, but they are simply moved by the impacts they suffer from development projects. It is likely that their fight is not against development but against their exclusion from the benefits of development. Relevant here are the insights of the Frankfurt School [24] and of Antonio Gramsci, who with his concept of “passive revolution” [25] has revealed the ability of capitalism to integrate losers in its imaginary of growth and consumption, and make them go on its side, ratifying and indulging on their needs.

which characterizes degrowth, unfortunately corrupts nowadays most of the political movements that oppose capitalism. Cassano [26] denounced it recently: in his telling metaphor, voluntary simplicity followers risk becoming just like those “twelve thousand saints” evoked by Dostojevski in “The Karamazov Brothers”, which contemplate their perfection, leaving the mass of ordinary people to the Grand Inquisitor’s whims.

3.2. *Re-doubling modern subjectivity*

The ideal of the human subject that underpins modern subjectivity is very hard to keep up with: it is made for saints. Originally, it was formulated on the basis of the strong ethics typical of Protestant entrepreneurs, described by Weber [27]. These include a hard individualization process, which requires from the subject to develop temperance and self-control, to strengthen his/her intellectual dimensions and to learn to put emotional feelings aside and to restrain immanent needs and desires, in order to achieve long-term aims. The subject is expected to think of the consequences of his/her action and to try to correct them before acting. Recent social research tells us that this kind of subjectivity is declining in our times. “Nihilistic techno-capitalism” [14] has fed another type of personality [28], a “de-modernized” subject [29–31] for which immanence is the privileged dimension of action. A person does not need temperance or a rational mood. On the contrary, she is constantly in search for satisfaction in the short-term, without remorse and without thinking about the consequences; and the new capitalism indulges to her passions, to her immediate desires.

Any political strategy that aims at grand social change, as degrowth purports to, has to deal with this sociological reality. It has to start on the basis of this existing anthropological ground.

But on the contrary, degrowth is premised upon the paradigm of “reflexive modernization” [32], i.e. it takes into account the perverse social and environmental effects of modernity, in order to avoid them. Reflexive modernization is rooted in the old modern pattern of subjectivity; it even requires its duplication, a modern subject “square”. However, this model has already been rejected by history. Degrowth asks for its implementation a kind of subjectivity that has disappeared from the social scene.

Voluntary simplicity corresponds to a return of Saint-Simon ethics, in which “real production” is the only recognized social dimension, and every symbolic reference disappears: every single community is expected to undertake the entire charge and burden of its livelihood. In relation, notice the meaning of “re-locate” in Latouche’s lexicon: “to locally produce most of the products necessary to meet the population needs and to finance local firms by the savings locally collected” [7].

Such an autarky regime achieved even at the municipal level would ultimately require from its members a tireless over-commitment and/or a savage state of deprivation. Autonomy, self-sufficiency, “relying exclusively on their own strengths”, control over every segment of social and economic life, etc., these are the archetypical “modern” aspirations. They express the will to regain our (lost) modern mentality.

In this sense, the criticism that Latouche himself addresses to the “local development” narrative, i.e. that it is nothing but a “localism directed by outside” (an expression I fully agree with) reads more like a self-criticism. In Latouche’s own call for re-localization the privileged reference point is the independent and enterprising man, who knows how to take care of himself without needing anyone. In its individualized form, the model for degrowth is “Robinson Crusoe” (which now recognizes its prostitute and prosaic version in the television format of “Survivor”), a novel which according to the sociology of literature is *the* foundational story of modernity.

I argue therefore that degrowth via relocalization [7] requires a systematic amplification of modernity’s conception of the human subject: more soberness, more temperance, more rationality, more self-control, more utilitarian attitude. In fact, a cornerstone of the envisioned degrowth society is the stationariness principle: under degrowth, the promise is that the currently unlimited growth dynamics will be reversed and a smooth downscaling will lead us to a steady-state of constant levels of production, enough to ensure the reproducibility of renewable resources. This steady state is to be obtained by a strategy of individual and collective self-restraint. The principle of unlimited utility is fully re-confirmed in this way, even as growth and wealth are rejected. It is this same principle that stands at the origins of the modern Western imagination of growth. Re-using, re-cycling, etc. . . . means perpetuating the “utilitarian” status of goods, not interrupting it in order to place things in a “sovereign” sphere [33].

The incitements to re-use, re-cycle, reduce resources are not a blow against the demon of productivism, as degrowth advocates believe, but, I argue that it is the Trojan horse of an intensified, complete rationalization. Under the degrowth narrative it is “useless” productions that must be reduced, such as advertising or perfumes, i.e. the few contemporary dimensions where it is still possible to experience some dysfunctional postures; it is toxic productions that must be reduced; it is unnecessary journeys and travel that must be eliminated. Even when this solution of “reducing” is applied to the work domain, thus promising a liberation from productivism, the option is presented as an opportunity for fostering the “citizens’ fulfillment” in private and political life. Once again, this is perfectly in line with the logic of modern subjectivity.

Hoping today and calling for a re-doubling of this lost pattern, when in fact the modern subject has already kicked the bucket long time ago, is not an appropriate political strategy. Thinking that proper and “wise” behaviors (those embraced by degrowthers) will spread in concentric circles in society, from the degrowthers outwards, due to their intrinsic goodness, is a gross strategic error. Cassano reminds us that the evil has the propensity to run much faster than the good, as it indulges in the most sensitive inner chords of people. The “saints”, instead, get increasingly detached from the people as their example requires fortitude and sacrifice. A “saint” proposal for voluntary degrowth will never be very attractive, especially in our society, where the logic of consumption gives rise to a race for offering attractive lifestyles, regardless of their wisdom, and beyond good and evil.

4. Degrowth and democracy revived

4.1. Toward a degrowth of the modern subject

I have argued in this essay that first, the current framing of the degrowth project cannot lead to a reactivation of democracy, and second, that the degrowth proposal is not politically feasible, hence it is unlikely to avoid the overexploitation of resources and the impending catastrophe that it purports to fight against. The degrowth proposal does not offer a real alternative for escaping this world, the very world – featured by the pervasiveness of *teukein* and the *legein* paradox – that generates the need for degrowth and which erodes democracy.

In its current formulation, with its privileged reference to the reduction of resources consumption, degrowth does not foster the re-birth of democracy because, on the one hand, it works as a technical and pre-political containment device and on the other hand because it proposes a further expansion, a redoubling of the modern subjectivity. Degrowthers fall on the same illusion that pervades those who propose the expansion of technology to solve the problems created by technology itself [34], or those who wish to counteract the perverse effects of growth with further growth.

I contend that degrowth should be intended in a radical “anthropological” sense [35]. To this aim, I propose a new foundation of degrowth upon the notion of a “degrowth of the modern subject”, i.e. a degrowth of the subject that lies at the foundation of the modern notion of democracy. Such a degrowth of the importance attached to the subject is a fundamental theoretical-ideological step to defuse the *legein* paradox. It is a proposal exactly in the opposite direction to that of the amplification of the modern human subject that is requested by most contemporary advocates of degrowth. I argue that we need to go through a degrowth of the modern subject, rather than its reflexive redoubling.

Paradoxically, we must yield autonomy to gain more autonomy. It is the subject that accepts to deflate his/her own vision, the subject that could also accept and implement the vision built by the community he/she belongs to. Similarly, only a subject who accepts “to be evermore less” can also accept “to have evermore less”, i.e. to undertake a degrowth path. To attain the two aims (democracy and degrowth) we need to put our stakes on a new pattern of subjectivity. Developing this new subjectivity must be the primary battle for degrowthers.

4.2. The Mediterranean disappearing identity

There is a place of inspiration for this new subjectivity, the Mediterranean region, both for historical-cultural and for political reasons.

In order to escape from Polyphemus, Ulysses invented the pseudonym “Noman”. The cunning of a “disappearing identity” enabled Ulysses to experience the cyclopean world without succumbing to it, i.e. it allowed him to beat an infinitely more powerful being. This identity simulation, which may be extended to the symbolic abolition of oneself, can be found in many inner regions of the Mediterranean. The lower Adriatic (including the Italian south-east and the south-western Balkans) is one of them.

Historically – and not just geographically – this is a very particular area, placed at the crossroads between Eastern and Western civilization, and between Northern efficiency and Southern stasis. For centuries its lands have been the extreme periphery of flourishing civilizations and grandiloquent empires, dwelling at a distance from the center of power. This peripheral condition has produced an “anti-identitarian” construction of subjectivity, i.e. a strategy of absence. This is characterized by a double movement: on the one hand mimicry and on the other preservation of a steady logic of social reproduction.

The mimetic approach is employed by the people to gain the favor of the representatives of History, namely the colonizers in office. The lower Adriatic inhabitant has developed a special ability to wear the signs of conversion to the various historical mainstreams that cross her moorlands. This is the “subject of dethinking”, as defined by Bene [36].

Mimicry and a steady (a-historical) existence seriously undermine the logic of economic exploitation mirroring a twofold strategy for livelihood: the parasitic capture of resource flows from the colonizing powers (related to mimicry) and the small scale self-production (e.g. horticultural cultivation, harvesting of nature wild fruits, wild animal breeding, etc.). These are not just outdated strategies; they stand out in full force in the region nowadays.

I argue therefore that in order to develop a new vision we must restart from such “de-thinking” peripheries, where residents are not involved in intensively taking care of themselves, but in surviving beyond an identitarian logic. It is there that the logic of exploitation and of self-promotion gives way to the capture by illicit means of the resources flows circulating in world economy, to dissipation and *dépense*. The possibility for radical transformation emerges where people search self-annihilation and give space to vision.

Specifically concerning degrowth, the Mediterranean may represent today an important place for experimentation. The Arab uprisings and the general crisis of the South European countries suggest that the region becomes more and more peripheral and that it is not able to hold on the growth run. Mediterranean countries do not hold competitive advantages in the international arena. They can avoid sinking only if they form an alliance and build a different arena. First of all, this means cutting the dependence ties with global competition. The failure of the blind *teukein*, evident in the current economic crisis, opens opportunities for a return to democracy, understood as a collective construction of social life. It opens the possibility for a world where the relation between humans and between humans and nature will not be governed by competition but by *legein*, where the production and the re-distribution of resources will be politically ruled, taking into account environmental

compatibilities and stressing paths of self-production. A world where work will be reduced to foster *dépense* activities, such as social dances, agonistic games, public debates about social life and the sense of the world, etc. In brief, a world of democracy and degrowth, where market and *teukein* will serve the community.

Such a strategy, compared to the one currently adopted by degrowth advocates, has the advantage of connecting itself more easily with contemporary social reality. The new Mediterranean space could meet the demodernizing and neo-tribal subjectivity trends that are spreading all over the world, stealing them from the clutches of techno-nihilist capitalism and from the global corporations that profit from it.

The current crisis solicits also the re-establishment of a collective control over money, labor and nature (land), as stated by Polanyi [37]. Thirty years of frenzied neoliberalism and techno-nihilist capitalism have eroded the foundations of society. Those who care about creating an alternative degrowth future need to assume a leading role, and put in the political arena a model of protection that places the preservation of the natural balance (and hence degrowth) at its center, as well as the self-establishment (self-institution) of society, that is the return of collective sovereignty and of a real democracy.

This is not easy of course: first of all because, in general, the trauma from the omnipotence of the State is still too recent; and secondly because, at a more specific level, the degrowth movement is still lagging in its devotion and connection with civil society and the grassroots. We who ally to the degrowth idea need therefore to get down to work at once, first of all in order to uproot the voluntarist hegemony inside the degrowth movement and then to rebuild the degrowth alternative on a purely political stand.

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