



The elephant and the snail

# INTRODUCTION

## Degrowth

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### 1. The twists and turns of degrowth

The term ‘*décroissance*’ (French for degrowth) was used for the first time by French intellectual André Gorz in 1972. Gorz posed a question that remains at the centre of today’s degrowth debate: ‘Is the earth’s balance, for which no-growth – or even degrowth – of material production is a necessary condition, compatible with the survival of the capitalist system?’ (Gorz, 1972: iv). Other Francophone authors then used the term in the follow-up to ‘The Limits to Growth’ report (Meadows *et al.* 1972). Philosopher André Amar (1973) for example, wrote on *La croissance et le problème moral*<sup>1</sup> for an issue on ‘*Les objecteurs de croissance*’ of the journal *NEF Cahiers*.

A few years later, André Gorz advocated explicitly degrowth in his book *Ecology and Freedom*, writing:

[O]nly one economist, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, has had the common sense to point out that, even at zero growth, the continued consumption of scarce resources will inevitably result in exhausting them completely. The point is not to refrain from consuming more and more, but to consume less and less – there is no other way of conserving the available reserves for future generations. This is what ecological realism is about. [. . .] Radicals who refuse to examine the question of equality without growth merely demonstrate that “socialism”, for them, is nothing but the continuation of capitalism by other means – an extension of middle class values, lifestyles, and social patterns [. . .]. Today a lack of realism no longer consists in advocating greater well-being through degrowth<sup>2</sup> and the subversion of the prevailing way of life. Lack of realism consists in imagining that economic growth can still bring about increased human welfare, and indeed that it is still physically possible.

(Gorz, 1980[1977]: 13)

Gorz was a precursor of **political ecology**. For him ecology was part and parcel of a radical political transformation. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, who inspired Gorz, was the intellectual pioneer of ecological economics and **bioeconomics**. In 1971 he published his magnum opus 'Entropy Law and the Economic Process'. In 1979, Jacques Grinevald and Ivo Rens, professors at the University of Geneva, edited a collection of the articles of Georgescu-Roegen with the title *Demain la décroissance* (interestingly without prior knowledge of Gorz also using the term). Grinevald chose the book title with Georgescu-Roegen's agreement, translating as *décroissance* the word 'descent' from G-R's article on a 'Minimal Bio-economic Programme' (Grinevald 1974).

With the end of the oil crisis and the advent of neo-liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, the interest on limits to growth and degrowth waned; even though in the 90ies the debate thrived again in French. In 1993, the Lyon-based environmental and non-violence activist Michel Bernard got in touch with Grinevald and invited him to write an article for his magazine *Silence* on 'Georgescu-Roegen: Bioeconomics and Biosphere'. The article explicitly referred to degrowth. Later on, in July 2001, Bruno Clémentin and Vincent Cheynet, also based in Lyon, the latter an ex-advertiser and founders with Randall Ghent of the magazine *Casseurs de pub* (the French equivalent of the Canadian *Adbusters*), launched the term 'sustainable degrowth'. Clémentin and Cheynet registered the term as an intellectual property to mark the date of its invention and playfully warned against its future misuse and conventionalization. The public debate on degrowth in France took off in 2002 with a special issue of *Silence* edited by the two in tribute to Georgescu-Roegen. The issue sold 5,000 copies and was reprinted twice. This was probably the starting point for today's degrowth movement.

In the first phase of the degrowth debate in the 1970s, the emphasis was on resource limits. In the second phase, starting in 2001, the driving force was the criticism of the hegemonic idea of 'sustainable development'. For economic anthropologist Serge Latouche, sustainable development was an oxymoron, as he argued in 'A bas le développement durable! Vive la décroissance conviviale!' In 2002 the conference 'Défaire le développement, refaire le monde' took place in Paris at the premises of UNESCO with 800 participants. The conference marked an alliance between Lyon-based environmental activists, like Bernard, Clémentin and Cheynet, and the post-development academic community to which Latouche belonged (see **development**). In 2002, the Institute for Economic and Social Studies on Sustainable Degrowth was founded in Lyon. A year afterwards, it organized in the city the first international colloquium on sustainable degrowth. The event gathered over 300 participants from France, Switzerland and Italy. Speakers included those who were to become the most prolific authors on degrowth, such as Serge Latouche, Mauro Bonaiuti, Paul Ariès, Jacques Grinevald, François Schneider and Pierre Rabhi. The same year, Bernard, Clémentin and Cheynet edited the book *Objectif décroissance*; this sold 8,000 copies and was re-printed three times and also translated into Italian, Spanish and Catalan.

*Décroissance*, as a movement of activists, flourished in Lyon in the early 2000s in the wake of protests for car-free cities, communal meals in the streets, food

cooperatives and campaigns against advertising. Spreading from France, it became a slogan mobilized by green and anti-globalization activists in Italy in 2004 (as ‘*decescita*’) and Catalonia and Spain in 2006 (as ‘*decreixement*’ and ‘*decrecimiento*’). In 2004, degrowth reached a larger audience in France with conferences, direct actions and initiatives like the magazine *La Décroissance, le journal de la joie de vivre*, which today sells 30,000 copies each month. In the same year, researcher-activist François Schneider undertook a year-long walking tour on a donkey to disseminate degrowth through France, receiving widespread media coverage. In 2007, Schneider founded in France the academic collective Research & Degrowth, with Denis Bayon and, later on, Fabrice Flipo, and promoted a series of international conferences. The first was in Paris in 2008 and the second in Barcelona in 2010. The English term ‘degrowth’ was ‘officially’ used for the first time at the Paris conference, marking the birth of an international research community. As the Barcelona group from the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA) joined the movement by hosting the second conference, the degrowth research community extended beyond its initial strongholds in France and Italy. ICTA provided links to the academic community of ecological economics as well as to Latin American networks of **political ecology** and **environmental justice**. Following the success of the Paris and Barcelona conferences, more conferences were held in Montreal (2011), Venice (2012) and Leipzig (2014), with degrowth spreading to groups and activities in Flanders, Switzerland, Finland, Poland, Greece, Germany, Portugal, Norway, Denmark, Czech Republic, Mexico, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Canada, Bulgaria, Romania and elsewhere.

Since 2008, the English term has entered academic journals with over 100 published articles and at least seven Special Issues in peer-reviewed journals (Kallis *et al.* 2010; Cattaneo *et al.* 2012; Saed 2012; Kallis *et al.* 2012; Sekulova *et al.* 2013; Whitehead 2013; Kosoy 2013). Degrowth is taught at universities around the world, including prestigious schools such as *SciencePo* in Paris. It has been used and misused by French and Italian politicians and has received coverage in many renowned newspapers, including *Le Monde*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *El Pais*, *The Guardian*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Financial Times*.

But what precisely is the meaning of degrowth?

## 2. Degrowth today

Degrowth signifies, first and foremost, a critique of **growth**. It calls for the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic **growth** as a social objective. Beyond that, degrowth signifies also a desired direction, one in which societies will use fewer natural resources and will organize and live differently than today. ‘Sharing’, ‘**simplicity**’, ‘**conviviality**’, ‘**care**’ and the ‘**commons**’ are primary significations of what this society might look like.

Usually, degrowth is associated with the idea that smaller can be beautiful. Ecological economists define degrowth as an equitable downscaling of production



Advocates of degrowth ask how the inevitable and desirable decrease of **GDP** can become socially sustainable, given that under **capitalism**, economies tend to either grow or collapse.

In the minds of most people, **growth** is still associated with an improvement, or well-being. Because of this some progressive intellectuals take issue with the use of the word degrowth. It is inappropriate, they claim, to use a 'negative word' to signify desired changes. However, the use of a negation for a positive project aims precisely to decolonise an **imaginary** dominated by a one-way future consisting only of growth. It is the automatic association of **growth** with better that the word 'degrowth' wants to dismantle. For degrowthers it is the unquestionable desirability of growth in the common sense that needs to be confronted if a discussion for a different future is to open up (Latouche 2009). Degrowth is a deliberately subversive slogan.

Of course some sectors, such as education medical care, or renewable energy, will need to flourish in the future, while others, such as dirty industries or the financial sector shrink. The aggregate result will be degrowth. We prefer also to use words such as 'flourishing' when we talk about health or education, rather than 'growing' or 'developing'. The desired change is qualitative, like in the flourishing of the arts. It is not quantitative, like in the growth of industrial output.

'**Development**', even if it were to be cleaned of its heavy historical meaning, or beautified with adjectives such as balanced, local or sustainable, is a problematic keyword. The word suggests an unfolding towards a predetermined end. An embryo 'develops' into a mature adult, who then ages and dies. A premise of modern liberal societies, however, is the denial of any ultimate collective end as well as the denial of anything but ascent. Development becomes self-referential: development for the sake of development, the unfolding of a predetermined, not-to-be-questioned arrow of progress with no end in sight (Castoriadis 1985).

A frequent criticism of the degrowth proposal is that it is applicable only to the overdeveloped economies of the Global North. The poorer countries of the Global South still need to grow to satisfy basic needs. Indeed, degrowth in the North will liberate ecological space for **growth** in the South. Poverty in the South is the outcome of the exploitation of its natural and human resources at low cost by the North. Degrowth in the North will reduce the demand for, and the prices of, natural resources and industrial goods, making them more accessible to the developing South. However, degrowth should be pursued in the North, not in order to allow the South to follow the same path, but first and foremost in order to liberate *conceptual* space for countries there to find their own trajectories to what they define as the good life. In the South there is a wealth of alternative cosmovisions and political projects such as **Buen Vivir** in Latin America (or Sumak Kawsay in Ecuador); **Ubuntu** in South Africa; or the Gandhian **Economy of Permanence** in India. These visions express alternatives *to development*, alternative trajectories of socio-economic system. They often put forward claims for global **environmental justice**. They only stand to flourish by a retreat of the **growth imaginary**

in the Northern countries that have promoted it, if not forced it to the rest of the world.

### 3. The panorama of degrowth

In what follows, we organize the (old and new) degrowth literature into five themes: the limits of – and the limits to – growth; degrowth and autonomy; degrowth as repoliticization; degrowth and capitalism; and proposals for a degrowth transition.

#### 3.1 *The limits of growth*

The foundational theses of degrowth are that **growth** is uneconomic and unjust, that it is ecologically unsustainable and that it will never be enough. Moreover, growth is likely to be coming to an end as it encounters external and internal limits.

Growth is uneconomic because, at least in developed economies, “illth” increases faster than wealth (Daly 1996). The costs of **growth** include bad psychological health, long working hours, congestion and pollution (Mishan 1967). **GDP** counts costs, such as the building of a prison or the clean-up of a river, as benefits<sup>3</sup>. As a result, **GDP** may still increase, but in most developed economies welfare indicators such as the Genuine Progress Index or the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare have stagnated after the 1970s. Above a certain level of national income, it is equality and not growth that improves social well-being (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

Growth is unjust, first, because it is subsidized and sustained by invisible reproductive work in the household (see **Care**). **Feminist economics** has shown that this work is gendered, with women doing most of it. Second, growth is unjust because it benefits from an unequal exchange of resources between core and periphery among, and within, nations. The energy and materials that fuel **growth** are extracted from **commodity frontiers**, often in indigenous or underdeveloped territories that suffer the impacts of extraction. Waste and pollutants end up in marginalized territories, communities or neighbourhoods of lower class or of different colour or ethnicity than the majority of the population (see **environmental justice**). However, although **growth** is uneconomic and unjust, it may as well be sustained precisely because the benefits accrue to those who hold power and the costs are shifted to those who are marginalized.

**Commodification**, which is part and parcel of **growth**, is eroding sociality and mores. **Care**, hospitality, love, public duty, nature conservation, spiritual contemplation; traditionally, these relations or ‘services’ did not obey a logic of personal profit (see **anti-utilitarianism**). Nowadays they increasingly become objects of market exchange, valued and paid for in the formal **GDP** economy. Profit motivations crowd out moral or altruistic behaviours and social wellbeing diminishes as a result (Hirsch 1976).

Above a certain level, **growth** does not increase **happiness**. This is because once basic material needs are satisfied, extra incomes are devoted increasingly to positional goods (e.g. a house bigger than the neighbour’s). Relative, and not

absolute, wealth determines access to positional goods. Everyone wants **growth** in order to raise his or her position, but as everyone rises together, no one gets better. This is a zero-sum game. Worse, growth makes positional goods more expensive. These are the **social limits of growth**: growth can never satisfy positional competition; it can only make it worse. **Growth** therefore will never produce “enough” for everyone (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012).

**Growth** is also ecologically unsustainable. With continuous global **growth** most planet ecosystem boundaries will be surpassed. There is a strong and direct correlation between **GDP** and the carbon emissions that change the climate (Anderson and Bows, 2011). The economy could in theory be decarbonized with the advancement of cleaner or more efficient technologies, or by a structural shift to services. However with 2 to 3 per cent global growth per year, the degree of decarbonization required is next to impossible. Global carbon intensity (C/\$) by 2050 should be 20–130 times lower than today, when the reduction from 1980 to 2007 was just 23 per cent (Jackson 2008). To date, there are hardly any countries which can claim an absolute reduction in material use or carbon emissions while growing. When they do, this is because they outsourced dirty industrial activities to the developing world. Absolute reductions in energy and material use (see **dematerialization**) are unlikely to come through technological progress: the more technologically advanced and efficient an economy becomes, the more resources it consumes because resources get cheaper (see **Jevons’ Paradox**). Service economies also are not materially light. Services have high **emergy** (embodied energy). Computers or the Internet embody lots of rare materials and energy, as well as knowledge and labour also ‘produced’ with energy and materials (Odum and Odum 2001).

**Growth** in the developed economies might be coming to an end. This might be due to diminishing marginal returns (Bonaiuti, 2014), the exhaustion of technological innovations (Gordon 2012) or limits in creating effective demand and investment outlets for capital accumulating at a compound interest rate (Harvey 2010). Natural resources also pose a limit to growth. Economic **growth** degrades high-order (low **entropy**) energy stocks, turning them into low-order (high **entropy**) heat and emissions. **Peak oil**, peaks in the extraction rates of essential stocks such as phosphorous, and climate change from carbon emissions, may already restrict **growth**. The new stocks that substitute oil are also exhaustible, such as shale gas, and often dirtier, such as coal or tar sands, accelerating climate change. Renewable energy from solar or wind flows is cleaner, but renewable sources yield lower energy surpluses (energy returns to energy investment – EROI), given the existing technology, compared to fossil fuels. A lot of conventional energy will have to be expended in the transition to renewables. A solar civilization can only support smaller economies, given the low EROI of renewable energies compared to fossil fuels. A transition to renewables will inevitably be a degrowth transition.

From a degrowth perspective, the current economic crisis is the result of systemic limits to growth. It is not a cyclical crisis or fault in the credit system. First, the crisis in the U.S. was triggered by the hike in oil prices; domestic trade suffered and workers’ mobility from the suburbs became unaffordable, leading to the house foreclosures that precipitated the subprime mortgage crisis. Second, the fictitious

(bubble) economy of finance and personal loans grew because there was no other source of growth and no other way to sustain demand from falling. Private and public **debt** sustained an otherwise unsustainable rate of **growth** (Kallis *et al.* 2009). Stagnation was delayed, but only temporarily.

### 3.2 Degrowth and autonomy

The fact that there are limits and growth is coming to an end is not necessarily bad. For many degrowthers, degrowth is not an adaptation to inevitable limits, but a desirable project to be pursued for its own sake in the search for **autonomy**. **Autonomy** was a keyword for thinkers such as Illich, Gorz and Castoriadis, but it meant something slightly different to each. Illich (1973) meant freedom from large techno-infrastructure and the centralized bureaucratic institutions, public or private, that manage them. For Gorz (1982) **autonomy** is freedom from wage-labour. Autonomous is the sphere of non-paid work where individuals and collectives enjoy leisure and produce for their own use, instead of money. For Castoriadis (1987) instead, **autonomy** means the ability of a collective to decide its future in common, freed from external ('heteronomous') imperatives and givens, such as the law of God (religion), or the laws of the economy (economics).

Following Illich, degrowthers take issue with fossil fuels not only because of **peak oil** or climate change, but because a high use of energy supports complex technological systems. Complex systems call for specialized experts and bureaucracies to manage them. They unavoidably lead to non-egalitarian and undemocratic hierarchies. **Autonomy** instead requires **convivial** tools, i.e. tools which are understandable, manageable and controllable by their users. An **urban garden**, a bicycle or a Do-It-Yourself Adobe house are convivial and autonomous. A weed-resistant GMO field, a high-speed train or an energy-efficient 'smart building' are not. Degrowthers are critical of such high-tech projects of ecological modernization and green growth not only because they might not turn out to be sustainable, but because they reduce **autonomy**. Projects that signify a degrowth **imaginary** – vacant lot gardening, pirate programming or bicycle repair shops – are convivial, they involve voluntary work and they are governed and shaped directly by their participants (see **nowtopians**).

Rather than *limits to growth*, the literature on **autonomy** emphasizes collective *self-limitations*. Limits, or rather self-limitations, are not invoked for the good of nature or to avoid an impending **disaster**, but because living simply, and limiting our footprint upon the non-human world that we happen to live in, is how the good life is conceived. Not least, limits also liberate from the paralysis of unlimited choice. And only systems with limited scale can become genuinely egalitarian and democratic, as only they can be governed directly by their users. Limits are therefore 'a social choice . . . and not . . . an external imperative for environmental or other reasons' (Schneider *et al.* 2010, 513). Environmental or social bads and risks – climate change, **peak oil** or uneconomic growth – simply make the case for collective self-limitations stronger.

It is not a coincidence that degrowthers are inspired by the **Neo-Malthusians** anarcho-feminists of Emma Goldman and not by Malthus. Goldman and her companions advocated conscious procreation not in the name of a population bomb but as part of a struggle against the exploitation by **capitalism** of female bodies to produce soldiers and cheap labour. The distinction here is subtle, but crucial. The **Neo-Malthusians** chose consciously to limit their reproduction as part of a project of social and political change. They did not do it for moral reasons, or because ‘they had to’. They did not do it to avert a **disaster**. Their act was **political**. It was pre-figuring the world they wanted to produce and inhabit.

### 3.3 Degrowth as repoliticization

Degrowth was thrown explicitly as a ‘missile word’ to *re-politicize* **environmentalism** and end the depoliticizing consensus on sustainable development (Ariès 2005). Sustainable development depoliticizes genuine political antagonisms about the kind of future one wants to inhabit; it renders environmental problems technical, promising win-win solutions and the (impossible) goal of perpetuating **development** without harming the environment. The ecological modernization promised by sustainable development evades the core contemporary dilemma, which according to Bruno Latour (1998) is whether ‘to modernize or to ecologize’. Degrowth takes sides. Ecologizing society, degrowthers argue, is not about implementing an alternative, better, or greener **development**. It is about imagining and enacting alternative visions *to* modern **development**.

In relation, degrowth calls for the politicization of science and technology, against the increasing technocratization of politics. A neat distinction between science and politics is impossible to sustain when dealing with questions about the global economy or climate change, where ‘wars of truth’ are waged and values shape the knowledge claims that different actors stake. New models of democratized knowledge production are necessary. **Post-normal science** proposes the extension of the peer-review community that ensures the quality of scientific inputs into decision-making to include all those with a stake, including not least lay people. **Post-normal science** calls for a shift of decisions from ‘communities of experts’, like scientific committees and advisory councils, to decisions by ‘expert communities’ (D’Alisa *et al.* 2010).

The apolitical, technocratic discourse of sustainable development is a manifestation of a broader process of **depoliticization** of public debate in liberal democracies, whereby politics have been reduced to the search for technocratic solutions to pre-framed problems instead of a genuinely antagonistic struggle between alternative visions. **Political ecology** attributes this **depoliticization** to the rise of neo-liberalism and the Washington consensus. These subjugated sovereign political choice to the needs of unregulated capital and liberalised markets. Degrowth scholars agree, but trace the origins of **depoliticization** further back in time. Neo-liberal reforms were – and are – justified in the name of **growth**, itself justified in terms of **development**. This **development** consensus, which spans across the left and right political

spectrum, and even across the Iron Curtain, evacuated **the political** before neoliberalism: socialist economies ended up resembling state capitalism, because they remained trapped in the pursuit of **growth** and **development**.

A distinguishing feature of modern, capitalist and socialist economies has been the (institutionalized) investment of a significant part of the social surplus into new production. The consequence of this is the disavowal of what was the exercise *par excellence* of political sovereignty in older civilizations: the decision for the destination of surplus (see theory of **dépense**). In older civilizations, often surplus was dedicated to ‘wasteful’ expenditures that did not serve a utilitarian purpose (see **anti-utilitarianism**). Expenditures in pyramids, churches, festivals, celebratory fires or **potlatch** were pursued because *they were* what ‘the good life’ was for these civilizations, not because they contributed to production or growth. In modern industrial civilization, such acts of wasteful **dépense** have been commodified and individualized. In modernity, the meaning of life is to be found by each individual alone. The premise is that each individual has the right to mobilize all resources necessary for this pursuit. At the societal level this translates into a non-negotiable demand for **growth**: only with growth can the demands of all not-to-be-limited individuals be satisfied. However, as individuals search elusively for sense on their own, the genuinely ‘political’ sphere, where sense could be constructed socially through collective acts of **dépense**, is evacuated and subordinated to the imperative of **growth**.

### 3.4 Degrowth and capitalism

As the late Eric Hobsbawm (2011: 12) put it very late in his long life, ‘there is a patent conflict between the need to reverse or at least to control the impact of our economy on the biosphere and the imperatives of a capitalist market: maximum growth in search for profit’. Two premises underlie this statement. The first was defended in Section 3.1: economic **growth** unavoidably increases throughput and negatively impacts the biosphere (against the argument of proponents of green growth or green capitalism that it is possible to both grow and reduce environmental impact). The second is that growth is an imperative under capitalism.

*In theory*, capitalism could survive without growth. Indeed, capitalist economies pass involuntary through periods of little, zero or negative growth. However, these have to be temporary periods. Indeed, under **capitalism** the lack of **growth** leads to an increase in the rate of workforce exploitation, if the rate of profit is to be sustained (Blauwhof 2012; Harvey 2010). But, intensifying exploitation cannot be sustained for too long without violence and counter-violence. Lack of growth therefore destabilizes **capitalism** and liberal democracy. A historical example is the rise of fascism after the Great Depression, or of communism in Russia before, political projects that aspired to change or end capitalism. **Growth** avoids redistributive conflict and sustains **capitalism** politically. It is in this concrete sense that **growth** is imperative for capitalism, not in the abstract.

History suggests that is highly unlikely that nations with capitalist economies would *voluntary* choose not to grow. *In theory*, however, one could imagine a scenario under

which political forces come democratically in power and enforce resource caps and social minima (e.g. a **job guarantee** for the unemployed), restricting the operation of **capitalism** within environmental and social limits (Lawn, 2005). However for this to happen a radical redistribution of political power would be necessary. Caps, new taxes or income/job security programs harm economically powerful interests with privileged access to governments. Blauwhof (2012) argues that nothing short of a revolution will bring about these institutional reforms. Would a system with such dramatic political and institutional changes be still capitalist? Jackson (2009) responds that it could still be capitalism, but a very different one; he declares his disinterest to semantic debates about the name of the system in a prosperous future without growth. But as Skidelsky and Skidelsky (2012: 6) put it, the end of **growth** ‘challenges us to imagine what life after **capitalism** might look like; for an economic system in which capital no longer accumulates is no longer **capitalism**, whatever one might want to call it’.

Degrowth of course is not only about reduced throughput. It is about imagining and constructing a different society – a society that manages to convince itself that it has enough and that it no longer has to accumulate. **Capitalism** is an ensemble of institutions – private property, the corporation, wage labour and private credit and money at an interest rate – whose end result is a dynamic of profit in search of more profit (‘accumulation’). The alternatives, projects and policies that signify a degrowth imaginary are essentially non-capitalist: they diminish the importance of core capitalist institutions of property, money etc, replacing them with institutions imbued with different values and logics. Degrowth therefore signifies a transition beyond capitalism.

### 3.5 The degrowth transition

A degrowth transition is not a sustained trajectory of descent, but a transition to convivial societies who live simply, in common and with less. There are several ideas about the practices and institutions that can facilitate such a transition and the processes that can bring them together and allow them to flourish.

#### *Grassroots economic practices*

**Eco-communities**, online communities (see **digital commons**), communities of **back-to-the-landers**, **cooperatives**, **urban gardens**, **community currencies**, time banks, barter markets, associations of child or health **care**. In the context of the crisis and as conventional institutions fail to secure the basic needs of people, there is a spontaneous proliferation of new non-capitalist practices and institutions, in places like Argentina, Greece, or Catalonia (Conill *et al* 2012).

These grassroots practices share five features. First, there is a shift from production for exchange to production for use. Second, there is a substitution of wage labour with voluntary activity, meaning a decommmodification and de-professionalization of

labour. Third, they follow a logic whereby the circulation of goods is set in motion, at least partly by an exchange of reciprocal 'gifts' rather than in search of profit (see **anti-utilitarianism**). Fourth, unlike capitalist enterprise, they do not have a built-in dynamic to accumulate and expand. Fifth, they are outcomes of processes of 'commoning'; connections and relations between participants carry an intrinsic value in and for themselves. These practices are non-capitalist: they diminish the role of private property and wage labour. They are new forms of **commons**.

They are also examples of degrowth in a more restricted sense. They have less carbon content and material throughput when compared to the State or market systems offering the same services. True, per unit of product they might be more inefficient due to a lower degree of specialization and division of labour. An alternative organic food network, for example, might require more workers per unit of product than an agri-business (though also less fertilizers, pesticides and fossil fuels). This is not necessarily bad as far as unemployment is concerned. Decentralized cooperative systems of water or energy production might provide less water or energy output per unit of labour and resource input. However, they are likely to be more environmentally benign precisely because their unproductiveness limits their scale (an inverse **Jevons'** effect): less efficient per unit, smaller as a whole.

Alternative practices of commoning are a source of innovation for renewing public services, averting their privatization. Cooperative health or school systems need not replace public health or education. The otherwise escalating costs of public education and health can be reduced by involving parents in the education of the children, or by developing neighbourhood networks of doctors and patients offering preventive health checks and basic first aid. Preventative health care based on intimate knowledge of the patient is much cheaper than high-tech diagnoses and treatments (these can be reserved for special cases). User-involvement is generally cheaper and more democratic than the expensive outsourcing of public services to private, for-profit providers. Degrowth therefore can bring an improvement, not a deterioration, of public services.

### *Welfare institutions without growth*

In the absence of growth, unemployment increases. In a degrowth transition, new welfare institutions will be needed to decouple paid employment from growth, or else decouple well-being from paid employment. An example of the first is the **job guarantee** scheme, which proposes to make the State an employer of last resort reducing *de facto* unemployment to zero. Another example is the proposal for an unconditional **basic income** granted to all citizens, financed by progressive taxation on wages and profits (while taxation for high incomes can set a **maximum income**) and taxes on consumption. This can secure a basic level of subsistence and security for all without access to paid work. **Worksharing**, i.e. a redistribution of work between the employed and the unemployed via a reduction of working hours in the paid sector, can also reduce unemployment, and redistribute wealth, if hours are reduced without loss of income.

The autonomous sphere voluntary and convivial activity stands to expand if a basic income secures the satisfaction of basic needs or if **worksharing** liberates time from paid work. A **job guarantee** can finance activities in the autonomous sphere, such as **care** and education services, work in urban food gardens, **cooperatives** or free software production. New welfare institutions and grassroots economic practices are therefore complementary.

**Care**, education, health or environmental restoration services have high social value and provide meaningful employment; they can form the backbone of a **new economy**, prosperous without growth. Such an economy will face less of an unemployment problem, since it will be a labour-intensive economy.

### *Money and credit institutions*

**Community currencies**, time banks and local exchange trading systems can contribute to downscaling and relocalizing economic activity, constraining circulation within a community. **Community currencies** have served as complements in periods of crisis, allowing continued access to vital services by people who were otherwise left out of the market economy. State money, however, remains the most important locus of intervention in a degrowth transition: first, because taxes, a large part of total circulation, are paid in it; and second, because **community currencies** cannot satisfy the requirements for inter-communal and international trade, which is inevitable in complex economies such as ours.

A transitional degrowth proposal is for the State to take back the control of the creation of new of money from private banks (**public money**). Private banks in effect create new money by issuing loans. While private banks can only issue money as debt through loans, the state could also issue money free of debt to meet public needs. For example, States could issue money to finance a **basic income** or a **job guarantee** or to subsidise **cooperatives**, **care** services, environmental conservation or renewable energy. **Public money** would improve public finances, as states would reclaim seigniorage (the difference between the nominal value of money and the cost of producing it), and as they will no longer borrow from private banks to finance public expenditures.

Money issued as debt creates a growth dynamic. Debts are repaid with an interest, and interest calls for **growth**. Economies cannot be expected to continue growing at the rate necessary to pay a **debt** itself accumulated in the past to sustain a fictitious **growth** (Kallis *et al.* 2009). Debt is a social relation. History is full of examples of societies that excused debts and started afresh. Western societies have maintained a materially affluent lifestyle by shifting promises of payment to the future. A debt jubilee will inevitably cause a decline in the living standards of small creditors and savers. From a degrowth perspective, the goal is not how to re-launch growth and pay off debts, but how to distribute fairly the costs of a jubilee adjustment. Citizen-run **debt audits** are essential for determining which debts are legitimate and which are not. It may be legitimate, for example, to

excuse the debts of those whose basic standard of living is threatened, but not pay back debts to those who lent for high profit.

### *The politics of a degrowth transition*

There is no agreement in the degrowth literature about the politics and the political strategies through which alternative institutions, imbued with the values of degrowth, could come to replace the current institutions of **capitalism**. Preferred strategies and political subjects range from non-wage labour **nowtopians**, who share a quasi-class experience of autonomous living and producing, to existing social movements, political parties, or even **Unions**. If there is a consensus in the degrowth community, this is that a transition can only be the outcome of multiple strategies and multiple actors; a movement of movements changing both everyday practices and state institutions (Demaria *et al.* 2013).

D'Alisa *et al.* (2013) classify degrowth strategies and actors into civil and 'uncivil', uncivil defined as those who refuse to be 'governmentalized'. Organized **disobedience** features in the repertoire of degrowth activists. This spans from the occupation of abandoned houses ('squats') to sit-ins against mega-projects and coal plants. This could include land occupations by unemployed landless or poor peasants. Financial **disobedience** includes acts such as that of Enric Duran, a prominent degrowth activist in Barcelona who 'expropriated' 492,000 Euros via loans from 39 banks just before the crisis in 2008, to denounce the speculative credit system dedicating the money to alternative projects.

Latouche (2009) instead sees change coming mainly through parliamentary politics and grassroots action. He posits degrowth as an agenda for parties of the Left, though he is against a 'degrowth party' as such. Others put more faith in social movements such as the **Indignados (Occupy)** to change the parliamentary system into a more direct form of democracy, such as that signified by the assemblies in the occupied squares. And yet others emphasize the transformative potential of non-capitalist grassroots economic practices of education, **care**, food provision, living and producing which are deemed **political**, even if they don't take place in the traditional arenas associated with politics, such as political parties, elections or parliaments. They are **political** because they challenge and develop concrete alternatives to the dominant institutions of **capitalism**, and which can be universalised. Interestingly, the practices of the **Indignados (Occupy)** movement – sit-ins, square orchards, communal kitchens, barter exchanges – prefigure the values expressed by alternative projects; the movement may be the incipient political expression of the **nowtopians**.

A hypothesis is that systemic change in the direction of degrowth will follow a similar dynamic with other systemic changes in the past. Capitalism emerged out of feudalism, as connections were forged, first between new economic practices (firms, corporations, trade contracts, banks, investments), and then with institutions that emerged through social struggles to support these practices (abolition of monarchies and feudal privileges, enclosure of the commons, liberal democracy, laws protecting private property). The grassroots practices and the welfare and monetary institutions reviewed in this section might be the seeds of a new

transformation emerging from within the system, in the latest crisis of **capitalism** and as the period of **growth** and expansion comes to an end.

#### 4. The future of degrowth

The future of degrowth is open. Research is still necessary to support foundational degrowth claims, claims that are firmly established *within* the degrowth community, providing its shared premises although they are far from being accepted by academia and society at large. Such claims include: the impossibility of dematerialization through technological advance and the inevitability of disastrous climate change if **growth** is to continue; the entry of developed economies into a period of systemic stagnation, partly due to resource limits; or the hypothesis that an abandonment of **growth** will revive politics and nourish democracy, rather than animate catastrophic passions. More research can help us understand how people and nations adapt to the lack of growth, why some grassroots practices succeed while others collapse or get incorporated into the mainstream, or how, and under what conditions, new welfare institutions will produce the outcomes their advocates claim they will.

The political question concerns the social dynamic, the actors, the alliances and the processes that will create a degrowth transition. This question is not just intellectual. Social change is a process of creation, impossible to predict in advance. What academic studies of degrowth can offer are arguments and narratives to animate the politics of transition. The ideas outlined in this entry have already done that. However if degrowth is to remain a concept that is alive and does not stale, there is no reason for these to remain the only narratives. We can use the ‘raw material’ of the degrowth vocabulary, and constantly create new imaginaries and arguments that escape false dilemmas such as ‘austerity versus spending’. This is what we attempt in the last chapter of this book where we frame a new thesis, grounding degrowth in **dépense**.

#### Notes

- 1 In this entry we leave the original titles in French, not only for reasons of language pluralism or practicality but also because many of the words involved sound more inspiring in French!
- 2 In the original translation of the text *Ecologie et liberté* (1977) to English in 1980, the misleading term ‘inversion of growth’ was used to translate *décroissance*. We replace it here with ‘degrowth’.
- 3 In this chapter, when we do not provide references for the statements we make, this means that the support for the argument can be found in the relevant entry (identified in bold).

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