

SYMPOSIUM

Introduction to the Degrowth Symposium

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In 2009, Mauro Bonaiuti shared with us his work, based on a still largely intellectual movement called degrowth (for recent contributions on this, see also the published proceedings of the “2nd Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and social Equity,” <http://www.degrowth.org/Proceedings-new.122.0.html>). After some correspondence and reflection, the idea emerged, thanks to Bonaiuti, that it would be appropriate to organize a forum on degrowth to promote an exchange of views that would in particular address the relationship between ecofeminist, Marxist, and degrowth perspectives. This collection of papers on degrowth is the outcome of Bonaiuti’s initiative and the interchange that followed among others invited to participate.

We at first found Bonaiuti’s manuscript of interest, but were unsure about how the approach could connect to an ecosocialist framework or to developing mutually beneficial and transformative dialogue among various left perspectives. There are nevertheless important overlaps of concern, and it is due to such overlap that a symposium eventually took shape. Bonaiuti’s approach, as evident in his contribution to this journal, centers on bridging the gaps among various perspectives on environmental destruction in order to develop common bases for political action.

Martínez-Alier furnishes a similar attempt in raising awareness with respect to potential alliances between environmental justice movements in the “South” and degrowth perspectives mainly in the European Union (E.U.). He includes, rather provocatively for me, feminist neo-Malthusian approaches (which I do not see as having anything Malthusian) as bridgeable with reformed Marxist ones (which I do not see as Marxist after such reform).

Latouche, in a related manner, takes great pains to explicate the meaning of degrowth (which he even deems a “radical Marxism”) as a way of questioning the ideological underpinnings of economy so as to go beyond, or escape from the economy and “use environmental resources reasonably, consuming raw materials and services as stone age societies of abundance once did.”

Tammilehto, who graciously modified his original paper so as to address this symposium, underlines other reasons it is both worthwhile to promote degrowth and that are embedded in already existing practices and social dissatisfaction induced by capitalism (thereby echoing recent writers like Gibson-Graham 1996). There is also the concept-slogan of degrowth itself, which is useful in calling attention, at least in E.U. countries, to the socially and environmentally destructive ideology (growth as intrinsically good) and practices (resolving problems through tweaking pricing mechanisms) predominant in capitalist societies (see also Martínez-Alier 1989).

Countering some of the foundations of degrowth perspectives, Brownhill, Turner, and Kaara emphasize that degrowth, for it to be more than a set of policies that could be co-opted by capitalists, must attend to the re-establishment and re-invention of the commons. This can be

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achieved through a process of de-alienation of labor, which necessarily involves struggles to overturn patriarchy and racism, which continue to be largely ignored by degrowth proponents (see also Perkins 2010).

Correia reinforces and adds to this critique by pointing out that existing power relations can easily make degrowth into a reactionary set of policies and practices, as capitalist competition intensifies over people's labor-power and over ecosystems and physical environments in the context of long-term environmental and social crises. In this regard, there is an ironic similarity between degrowth and the No Impact Man anti-consumerist alternative (bourgeois primitivism) in the U.S. It is a similarity with which degrowth perspectives should contend so as to prevent co-optation. In other words, degrowth approaches have yet to grapple with the difference between actual environmental limits and scarcities reflecting capitalist appropriation of environments (and, I would add, people's bodies, in line with Brownhill, Turner, and Kaara).

Schwartzman points out that there are qualitative aspects to capitalism that are being glossed over by degrowth proponents, who focus mainly on the quantitative features of capitalism. The form of energy resources used matters a great deal and must be addressed so as to find ways out of the destructive propensities of capitalism. Finding alternatives will involve much more than locally based initiatives and new ways of accounting, and will have to include a lot more international mobilization and, as Schwartzman stresses, developing and engaging directly with the sciences that contribute to making technologies and to fostering understandings that enable the realization of another type of society.

I have to admit that I tend to side with the above critiques of degrowth and will briefly add some of my own. First, degrowth approaches fixate on the outcome of capitalist processes, including consumption, as Correia points out. These processes are founded on the violent exclusion of the majority from the means of reproduction and production, which enables exploitation (surplus-value extraction) and thereby capital accumulation. Capital accumulation, however, is not reducible to "growth," as some, like Latouche, hold. It is a process of appropriation and control to expand the ability to appropriate and control more. It is therefore much more than wealth accumulation and certainly not limited to money valuation (such as the total sales of goods and services, as defined for Gross Domestic Product calculations; see also Mészáros 2000).

Second, even if there is an overall agreement that the wealthiest (in capitalist terms) must be made to reduce consumption levels (see also Daly 2010 and the Barcelona Degrowth Declaration, <http://www.degrowth.org/Barcelona-2010-Declaration.119.0.html>), those arguing for degrowth tend to avoid dealing with the militarism and imperialism (occasionally still manifested through warfare and conquest) that enables the diversion of resources largely to meet the consumption levels of a minority of people, as Brownhill, Turner, and Kaara and Schwartzman observe (see also Foster 2011).

Third, if understood as paradigm shift (as Latouche has it), degrowth posits changes in ideas prior to the struggles that will make such ideational transformations happen. This to me is a step backward in terms of political strategy, since at the very least people must organize and mobilize to force capitalists and their allies into a paradigm shift.

Fourth, while I certainly agree with the necessity to stop endless accumulation, the matter is rather more complex. Economic growth entails diverse combinations of resource extraction and

consumption patterns and practices that are not necessarily directly correlated with pricing. Not all forms of economic growth have the same effects, environmentally or socially. Trading in derivatives, for example, can raise or decrease the prices of commodities, so that higher economic growth may entail less resource extraction at some point in time and in some places, and instead lead to higher resource extraction at another time and/or place. This must be borne in mind when engaging in political struggles, as part of posing arguments that will match the daily reality of most people. In this regard, it seems to me more effective to focus attention on the relationship between increasing or constant rates of resource extraction/depletion and deprivation or endangerment for, at various times, the majority of people. One can point, as many left activists do, to such blatant contradictions between economic productivity and the satisfaction of even basic human needs in the case of food production, healthcare provision, industrially enhanced global warming, and other forms of environmental racism at different scales. Reducing the chasms to ones between “North” and “South” to me unduly papers over extreme inequalities within both, so I find such expressions counterproductive.

These critiques notwithstanding, I am grateful for the generosity of both proponents and detractors of degrowth included in this special issue in pushing for a mutually enhancing dialogue that is long overdue. But I also congratulate them for their efforts in endeavoring to engage with, if not integrate, what are usually viewed as irreconcilable perspectives. They may very well be irreconcilable, ultimately (at least this is my impression), but being clear about differences enables prospects for cooperation as well. This, in my view, can only contribute to constructive exchange and collaboration among differing left environmentalist perspectives.

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