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HOW DO WE LEARN TO WANT LESS?

The globe downshifted

There are practical ways in which we could immediately start to save our species from ecological and social crisis and our planet from being destroyed by our greed. So why aren't we adopting them? What prevents us from desiring a simpler and better way of life?

By Serge Latouche

The dream of building a self-sufficient and economical society is widely shared, even if under many names. *Décroissance* (degrowth), downshifting, anti-productivism, requalified development and even sustainable development all evoke roughly the same goal. The French Greens, mean exactly the same thing by anti-productivism as growth objectors (1) mean by degrowth (2). The organisation Attac has appealed for "a move towards progressive and reasoned deceleration in world growth, under particular social conditions, as the first step towards reducing predatory and devastating production in all its forms".

Agreement on the re-evaluation our economic system needs, and on the values that (3) we should bring to the fore, is not confined to degrowth advocates thinking in terms of post-development. A number of sustainable or alternative development activists have made similar proposals (4). All agree on the need for a drastic reduction of humanity's ecological footprint. None would contradict John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, published in 1848, in which he wrote that all human activities that do not involve unreasonable consumption of irreplaceable materials, or do not damage the environment irrevocably, could be developed indefinitely. He added that those

activities many consider to be the most desirable and satisfying - education, art, religion, fundamental research, sports and human relations - could flourish (5).

We could go further. For who would actually declare themselves to be against saving the planet, preserving the environment and looking after plants and animals? Who actually advocates destroying the ozone layer and messing up the climate? Not politicians. Even in the upper echelons of the business world, there are company directors and economic authorities who favour a radical change in orientation, to save our species from ecological and social crisis.

So we need to identify the opponents of degrowth politics more precisely, along with the obstacles to implementing such a programme, and the political form that an eco-compatible society ought to take.

I. Who are the enemies of the people?

The problem with trying to put a face on the adversary is that the economic bodies that hold real power (for example multinational companies) do not and inherently cannot exercise that power directly. Susan Strange has noted that some of the main responsibilities of the state in a market economy are no longer borne by anyone today (6). While Big Brother is now anonymous, his subjects' servitude is more voluntary than ever. The manipulation achieved by advertising is infinitely more insidious than that of propaganda. In these conditions, how can the mega-machine possibly be challenged politically?

For some on the far left, the stock answer is that capitalism is the problem, leaving us stuck in a rut and powerless to move towards a better society. Is economic contraction compatible with capitalism? This is a key question, but one that it is important to answer without resorting to dogma, if the real obstacles are to be understood.

The Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy has come up with a number of ingenious win-win frameworks for nature's interaction with capital. The Negawatt scheme aims to cut energy consumption by three-quarters without any drastic reduction in needs. It proposes a system of taxes, norms, bonuses, incitements and selective subsidies to make virtuous behaviour an economically attractive option and to avoid large-scale waste. In Germany there is a credits system initiative that effectively makes energy-efficient houses cheaper to build, despite the construction work being at least 10% more expensive. Another proposal is that rental rather than ownership should become the norm for such goods as photocopiers, fridges and cars. This would create a pattern of constant recycling that could slow our mad rush for new production. But would that really avoid the rebound effect: the economic principle whereby reduced material and energy costs lead, via reduced financial

costs, to increased material consumption (7)? Nothing could be less certain.

Eco-compatible capitalism is conceivable in theory, but unrealistic in practice. Capitalism would require a high level of regulation to bring about the reduction of our ecological footprint. The market system, dominated by huge multinational corporations, will never set off down the virtuous path of eco-capitalism of its own accord. It is a system made of anonymous, utilitarian machines for generating dividends. These will not give up their rapacious consumption of resources unless they are forced to do so. Even where company directors support self-regulation, they cannot impose it upon the majority of free-riders who are guided by a single principle: maximising the company's share value in the short term. If the power to regulate were in the hands of an external body (the state, the people, a union, an NGO, the United Nations), then that power would be enormous. It could rewrite the social rulebook. It could put society back in charge.

Mechanisms for countering power with power, as existed under the Keynes-Fordist regulations of the Social Democratic era, are conceivable and desirable. But the class struggle seems to have broken down. The problem is: capital won. We looked on, powerless if not indifferent, as it swept away everything in its path, including the western working class. We are currently witnessing the steady commercialisation of everything in the world. Applied to every domain in this way, capitalism cannot help but destroy the planet much as it destroys society, since the very idea of the market depends on unlimited excess and domination.

A society based on economic contraction cannot exist under capitalism. But capitalism is a deceptively simple word for a long, complex history. Getting rid of the capitalists and banning wage labour, currency and private ownership of the means of production would plunge society into chaos. It would bring large-scale terrorism. It would still not be enough to destroy the market mentality. We need to find another way out of development, economism (a belief in the primacy of economic causes or factors) and growth: one that does not mean forsaking the social institutions that have been annexed by the economy (currency, markets, even wages) but reframes them according to different principles.

II. Reforms or revolution

A number of simple, apparently anodyne measures would be enough to set the virtuous circles of degrowth in motion (8). A reformist transition programme, of just a few points, could be arrived at simply by drawing some commonsense conclusions from our diagnosis of the problem. We should:

- ▶ Reduce our ecological footprint so that it is equal to or less

than the sum of Earth's resources. That means bringing material production back down to the levels of the 1960s and 1970s.

- ▶ Internalise transport costs.
- ▶ Relocalise all forms of activity.
- ▶ Return to small-scale farming.
- ▶ Stimulate the production of "relational goods" - activities that depend on strong interpersonal relationships, such as babysitting, caring for the bereaved or terminally ill, massage, even psychoanalysis, whether traded commercially or not, rather than on the exploitation of resources.
- ▶ Reduce energy waste by three-quarters.
- ▶ Heavily tax advertising expenditure.
- ▶ Decree a moratorium on technological innovation, pending an in-depth assessment of its achievements and a reorientation of scientific and technical research according to new aspirations.

Key to this programme is the internalisation of external diseconomies - those costs incurred by the activity of one player but borne by the community at large (such as all those related to pollution). This idea is ostensibly in full keeping with orthodox economics. But it would clear the way towards a degrowth society. It would place the costs of our social and environmental problems on the books of the companies responsible for them. Imagine the impact that this would have: if businesses had to accept the costs of the transport, security, unemployment and education that their functioning requires (not to mention the costs of their environmental impact), then our societies would start to function differently. These reformist measures, whose principles were outlined in the early 20th century by the liberal economist Arthur Cecil Pigou, would bring about a revolution.

The reason for this is the scale of the disincentive that these measures would represent for any business adhering to capitalist logic. Already, no insurance company will provide cover for risks associated with nuclear power, climate change or genetically modified organisms. Imagine the paralysis that would ensue if firms had to cover for health risks and social risks (unemployment), or the aesthetic aspects of environmental degradation. Countless activities would suddenly no longer be viable. Initially, the system would grind to a halt.

But that halt could be a transitional period on the path to an alternative society; it would certainly be proof of the urgent need for such change. For the proposals that might make up a manifesto for degrowth politics stand little chance of being adopted, and even less of being brought to fruition, without total subversion of the current system. These realistic and reasonable suggestions can only be enacted via a utopian project: the construction of an alternative society.

Conceiving an alternative society requires attention to detail. This is precisely what Marx refused to do: the dirty dishes of the future. Take the necessary dismantling of large companies. It immediately raises a host of questions: what limit should be set on the size of a company? Should it be measured in terms of turnover, or numbers of employees? How could our vast technical systems be maintained without mega-corporations to run them? Or should certain systems or types of activity be abandoned (9)?

Any transition would have to answer tricky questions. But some answers are available. A massive reconversion programme could turn car factories into cogeneration power plants (where heat and electricity are generated at the same time). Such techniques have already turned many German homes into net producers of electricity, rather than consumers. Solutions exist: it is the conditions for their adoption that are lacking.

III. Global dictatorship vs local democracy

Consumer democracies are dependent on growth, for without the prospect of mass consumption, the inequalities would be unbearable (and they are already getting that way, thanks to the crisis in the growth economy). The foundation myth of modern society is that the trend is towards more equal conditions. Inequalities are provisionally accepted, since many goods that were once reserved for the privileged are now widespread, and the luxuries of today will be accessible to all tomorrow.

For this reason, many doubt the capacity of democratic societies to take the measures that our environment needs. This view can see no other solution than a form of authoritarian ecocracy: ecofascism or ecototalitarianism. In the highest spheres of capital's empire (at the elite, semi-secret Bilderberger Organisation, for example), thinkers have been discussing this possibility. Faced with a serious threat, the masses of the North might well hand over their freedom to demagogues promising to preserve their lifestyles. This plan would of course entail a drastic aggravation of global injustice and, ultimately, the liquidation of a substantial proportion of the species (10).

The strategy of degrowth economics is different. It wagers on a stick-and-carrot combination: regulations designed to force change, plus the ideal of a convivial utopia, will add up to a decolonisation of minds and encourage enough virtuous behaviour to produce a reasonable solution: local ecological democracy.

The revitalisation of the local opens up a far smoother and less uncertain route to economic contraction than the problematic notion of a universal democracy. It gives the lie to the ideal of a unified humanity as the only way to achieve harmony with the planet, one of the myriad false good ideas thrown up by

More about Serge Latouche.

Translated by Gulliver Cragg

(1) Members of the ROCADe Network of Growth Objectors for Post-development. See www.apres-developpement.org/accueil...

(2) *Décroissance*, now a buzzword in French, means the replacement of economic growth with a steady downscaling in production levels to bring human use of the planet's resources

back within sustainable limits.

(3) See Serge Latouche, "The world downscaled", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English language edition, December 2003.

(4) As early as 1975, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation proposed the same self-limitation measures, for "endogenous, self-reliant development", as degrowth advocates propose today: "A ceiling on meat consumption, oil consumption . . . more economical use of buildings . . . greater durability of consumer goods ... no privately owned automobiles." Dag Hammarskjöld report, 1975.

(5) *Principles of Political Economy*, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

(6) Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

(7) See www.faw.uni-ulm.de/asis/html/backgr...

(8) Without affecting other healthy public measures such as the taxation of financial transactions or the setting of an upper limit on earnings.

(9) Ivan Illich believed that some technologies were convivial and others were not and never could be. See Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, Calder and Boyars, London, 1973. Read Thierry Paquot, "The nonconformist", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English language edition, January 2003, for a profile of Illich.

(10) See William Stanton, *The Rapid Growth of Human Population 1750-2000: Nation by Nation*, Multi-Science Publishing, Brentwood, 2003.

(11) See the last chapter of Serge Latouche, *Justice sans limites*, Paris, Fayard, 2003.

(12) In ancient Greece, the natural arena for politics was the city-state, a grouping of neighbourhoods and villages.

(13) Takis Fotopoulos, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy: the Crisis of the Growth Economy and the Need for a New Liberatory Project*, Cassell, London, 1997.

(14) Alberto Magnaghi, *Le projet local*, Mardaga, Brussels, 2003.

(15) Fotopoulos, op cit.

(16) Raimon Pannikar, *Politica e interculturalità*, L'Altrapagina, Città di

everyday western ethnocentrism. Cultural diversity is surely the only way to achieve peaceful social intercourse (11).

Democracy can probably only function where the polis is small and firmly anchored to a set of values. For the economist Takis Fotopoulos, the aim of universal democracy presupposes a "confederation of *demos*" made up of small, homogenous units of around 30,000 people (12), a size at which most basic needs could be provided for locally. "Given their huge size, many modern cities would probably have to be divided into a whole set of *demos*," says Fotopoulos (13).

With our cities and towns restructured around little neighbourhood republics, we could turn our attentions to the more thorough reorganisation of human land use recommended by the Italian town-planner Alberto Magnaghi. He suggests "a long and complex period (50 to 100 years) of purification. During this period people will no longer be engaged in turning more and more fens and fallow land over to farming, nor in pushing transport links through such areas. Instead, we will set about cleaning up and rebuilding the environmental and territorial systems that have been destroyed and contaminated by human presence. In so doing, we shall create a new geography" (14).

It may sound utopian. But the utopia based around local community politics is more realistic than people think, since expectations and possibilities grow out of citizens' hands-on experiences. In Fotopoulos's view, "Standing in local elections gives one the chance to change society from below, which is the only truly democratic strategy. It is unlike both state-based methods (which aim to change society from above by taking control of the state) and 'civil society' activity (which doesn't try to change the system at all)" (15).

The relationships between the polities within the global village could be regulated by a democracy of cultures, in what might be called a pluriversalist vision. This would not be a world government, but merely an instance of minimal arbitration between sovereign polities with highly divergent systems. The philosopher and theologian Raimon Panikkar has developed an alternative vision to that of a world government, which he calls the bio-region: "natural regions where livestock, plants, animals, water and men form a unique and harmonious whole. We need to divorce the myth of the universal republic from the notion of a world government or system of control, or a world police. The way to do this is by developing a different kind of relationship between bioregions" (16).

Whatever one makes of these visions, one thing is certain: the creation of democratic local initiatives is more realistic than that of a democratic world government. Once we have ruled out the idea of tackling the power of capital head-on, what remains is the possibility of dissidence. This is the strategy of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas in Mexico. They have

Castello, 1995.

(17) According to Gustavo Esteva in *Celebration of Zapatismo*, Multiversity and Citizens International, Penang, 2004.

reinvented the notion of communal goods and spaces - "commons" - and regained real popular control over them. Their autonomous management of the Chiapas bioregion is one illustration, in one context, of how localist dissidence can work (17).

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