

TEN QUESTIONS ON DEGROWTH: CONCEPTUAL BASIS FOR A SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISCUSSION

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BAYON, D.; FLIPO F.; SCHNEIDER, F. *Decrecimiento: 10 preguntas para comprenderlo y debatirlo*. Mataró: Ediciones de intervención cultural/El Viejo Topo, 2011. 236 p. Translated from the French original: *La décroissance, 10 questions pour comprendre et en débattre*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2010. Translation: Julia Calzadilla. Notes, references, graphs. ISBN: 978-84-15216-11-7.

Decrecimiento: 10 preguntas para comprenderlo y debatirlo was originally published in France in 2010, entitled: *La décroissance, 10 questions pour comprendre et en débattre*. The aim of this book is to clarify the concept of degrowth. In a easy to grasp and consistent manner it shows that some of the accusations and suspicions around degrowth are either due to lack of good faith or misunderstandings. It is an excellent text for those who wish to learn about degrowth for the first time because it presents its general foundations and shows how it differs from other “currents” of thought.

By reading this book, it becomes clear that degrowth is still a recent concept and, therefore, it is still in its early stages of development. However, its currents or theoretical roots are older than the term itself.

The book is divided into 10 chapters and each chapter refers to one of the following questions, respectively: 1) what does degrowth mean? 2) is it a new concept or an old reactionary idea? 3) why degrowth and not sustainable development? 4) is degrowth the end of scientific and technological progress? 5) is degrowth Malthusian? 6) privation or joy of living? 7) does degrowth mean recession, unemployment and the end of the market economy? 8) does degrowth relate to countries of the South? 9) does it imply a planned or authoritarian political regime? 10) what does a policy of degrowth actually mean?

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In order to provide credibility to their work the authors do not hide the fact that they belong to a social movement that supports degrowth. Nevertheless, they believe that their answers to these questions are provided with as much intellectual rigor as possible, preferring to focus on ideas and prioritizing authors and theorists, instead of following a militant agenda. In order to do so, they rely on a wealth of bibliographical material encompassing various areas of knowledge such as philosophy, sociology, political sciences, ecology and economics. Bibliographical references provide the theoretical basis of the concept and also show what is not degrowth. Thus, the authors consider other “currents” of thought, such as productivist Marxism, neo-liberalism, political ecology, green parties, green growth and the “New Right” movement. One of the many positives of this book is that it clearly defines the innovative contributions degrowth brings to the universe of conceptions which deal with development or socio-environmental crises. Furthermore, it presents the drawbacks of other “currents” of thought and indeed how they have contributed towards aggravating the socio-environmental crisis.

There is not enough space for me to comment on all the answers given to the ten questions. Therefore, I will focus on those that express the central concepts of degrowth, provide answers to some criticisms and misunderstandings, and put forward elements which are not often present in socio-environmental discussions in Brazil (Benasayag e Rey, 2012; Schwartzman, 2012).

The concept of degrowth does not have a single definition, but encompasses a wealth of meanings. The authors present the plurality of currents of thoughts within degrowth which range from ecological critiques to critiques of the system of needs, from entropy to critiques of political economy, from democratic to culturalist critiques, as well as the crises in meanings which post-industrial societies are going through.

This plurality is not without purpose nor does it lack a unifying meaning. It is organized within the text in such a way as to show that the general formulation of degrowth - “consuming less to live better” - is not an apparent banality, but “is at the heart of a market-industrial way of life which it means to address and calls for a revolution under very different terms to the socialist project of the 20th century” (p. 60).

Degrowth is put forward as a radically new concept. Innovations relate to the suppositions that extra growth in developed economies will only aggravate global inequalities - in social and ecological terms - and that all development theories, without exception, aim to stimulate economic growth. Therefore, degrowth opens up radically new opportunities. Another novelty is that degrowth “particularly allows for a reconsideration of the debate on the autonomy of society vis-à-vis the State and the influence of economic and instrumental thinking employed by large state bureaucracies (researchers and managers) and the private sector (economic and financial groups)” (p. 78).

According to the authors, sustainable development is essentially considered to be an empty concept. It does not differentiate between the responsibilities of millionaires and paupers in relation to the socio-environmental crisis, allowing for large-scale *greenwashing*. When analyzing the origins of the concept of development and some of its theoretical foundations, the authors show that sustainable development is still linked to the set of managerial and administrative recipes which have led humanity into the

socio-environmental crisis. They conclude that the political and philosophical criteria on which sustainable development is based is not conducive to its objectives. On the contrary, they can aggravate socio-environmental unsustainability.

The concepts upon which degrowth is founded, based on culturalist and democratic currents and post-colonial studies, provide an overall critique of the market economy, industrialization, modernization and globalization. It is within this critical context that the meaning of degrowth in relation to the countries of the South is seen as breaking with the “economic and cultural dependency on the North. Thus, recovering a historical trajectory that was interrupted by colonization, development and globalization, finding and reclaiming their own cultural identity” (p. 195). No one who supports degrowth has argued for homogeneous degrowth in all parts of the world. Supporters of this concept argue that the natural resources accessible to the wealthy today will not be available to the poor in the future due to environmental limitations. Furthermore, they believe that the growth of some is the consequence of the impoverishment of others. Therefore, a vital issue for supporters of degrowth is a massive reduction in inequality.

By supposing that many natural resources are limited and doubting the arrival of a savior technology which would allow the levels of consumption of the wealthy to be universalized means that degrowth is exposed to charges of Malthusianism. Degrowth does in fact mention population and supposes that no human society should allow the growth of its population to go unchecked. However “regulation should be egalitarian and democratic and not violent and inhuman in face of disease and hunger as Malthus would have wished” (p.119). It rejects restrictions on the number of children and supposes a demographic transition by means of female emancipation, literacy and democracy, among other factors. Thus, population is an important factor, but it is not the only source of problems. Focusing on population is a reactionary measure and it prevents the analysis of distribution issues. In this way, degrowth does not focus on the size of population but on the consumption of natural resources. Those who argue for degrowth believe that “it is not human beings who are too numerous, but vehicles” (p. 118). Therefore, there is no need to reduce population size, rather it is necessary to decrease and distribute the consumption of natural resources.

The essence of the debate around degrowth resides in “thinking and putting into practice a free and equitable transformation, chosen as a means towards a more sober and solidary society” (p. 207). The authors synthesize the centrality and significance which supporters of degrowth attach to democracy: popular sovereignty, equality of conditions and participative decision-making. Thus, they refute the accusation that authoritarianism is inherent to degrowth, above all in relation to deciding what is necessary to produce and consume. Furthermore, “one of the most important reasons degrowth is so vital is the threat economic institutions which foster growth pose to democracy” (p. 209). In this way, the authors not only “prove” that degrowth is not authoritarian, but they invert the accusation and cast doubt on whether we are effectively living in a democracy, whether a growth economy “is democracy” and whether the institutions which make economic growth possible are actually democratic.

Readers interested in developing further knowledge on the subject should seek the original authors of the theoretic foundations of degrowth, who are duly cited in this book. Other literary sources for delving further into the literature on degrowth are the material available from the four international conferences on degrowth which have taken place (Paris – 2008, Madrid – 2010, Montreal – 2012 and Venice – 2012). There are also a number of articles published in special editions and sections of the following periodicals *Ecological Economics* (Kallis; Kerschner; Martinez-Alier, 2012), *Futures* (Cattaneo et al., 2012), *Journal of Cleaner Production* (Kallis; Schneider; Martinez-Alier, 2010; Sekulova et al., 2013) and *Capitalism Nature Socialism* (Degrowth, 2012).

Other options for a good introduction to the subject of degrowth and which partly provide answers to these ten questions are two publications available in Brazil. One is a translation of the French book “Pequeno Tratado do Decrescimento Sereno”, by Latouche (2009), already an established authority in the field of degrowth. The other option is the only book that has been produced in Brazil on degrowth which brings together both Brazilian and foreign authors: “Enfrentando os Limites do Crescimento: sustentabilidade, decrescimento e prosperidade” [Facing the Limitations of Growth: sustainability, degrowth and prosperity] (Léna e Nascimento, 2012).

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Submitted on: 26/02/2013

Accepted on: 24/06/2013