

Fertilizing degrowth by unproductive expenditure. Bataille versus Latouche

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Abstract

The thesis we are proposing is that the political project of degrowth in its current formulations (namely that by Serge Latouche) is not sustainable on the anthropological level: it is expected to bring about a social change, leaving the basic anthropological structure, belonging to the developmental modernity, untouched. We are going to try and unveil the numerous gaps in degrowth by comparing it with the theory of «*dépense*» by Georges Bataille and his «*general economy*». The solidarity of the project of degrowth with the founding imaginary structures of the present time that he means to question is clear, starting with the central argument used against the growth society: the spectre of catastrophe. This critical process shows the primacy of the safeguard principle of «*life for life*» that is both specular to the principle of «*growth for growth*», and also is the foundation of the «*neutralist*» policy of the utilitarian tradition. Generally speaking, degrowth, in its contempt for catastrophe, aims at the preservation of an immanent-to-itself existence, that no longer recognises the need for waste, for reversion. The «*discontent in contemporary civilisation*» is not determined by the threat of a natural catastrophe, but paradoxically by the absence of a collective and participatory implementation of the catastrophe, rejected by the imagination of modernity, along which degrowth is perfectly aligned.

The anthropological inconsistencies of the project show up in particular in the political construction of the «*society of degrowth*»: here it is expected to preserve the autonomous constitution of the modern subject, by imposing both a pre-established political-territorial architecture and overwhelming values. All this is incompatible with any democratic autonomy. The perspective of degrowth requires, instead, a radical coming to terms with the issue of resacralisation and reversion which it currently avoids.

1. Introduction

In the debate on degrowth there is a clear lack of thought about the anthropological framework of the project. This stems from an assumption often believed to be implicit: that one can gear towards degrowth, leaving untouched the imaginary statutes of a “good” modernity (indeed – it is asserted – degrowth becomes feasible exactly thanks to these imaginary statutes). Instead, we believe that any

“degrowth policy” whatsoever is bound to fail if it is not supported by a consistent “anthropology of degrowth”.

But the question is not well formulated, since even if the objectives of degrowth were likely to be achieved, preserving the imagination of our modern tradition, we would still obtain an uninhabitable world pervaded with the same anxiety that exists in the societies of growth.

Then, thinking over the anthropological framework is not only useful simply to make degrowth feasible, but also to thoroughly reassert the objectives and redefine both the reasons why we criticize the society of growth, and the nature and purposes of the alternative proposed. In short, with this paper we intend to:

- 1) Show that the project of degrowth currently rests on the same anthropological infrastructure of the “growth” regime (and that this circumstance makes it unsustainable in the long run);
- 2) Give some suggestions for reconstructing an anthropological sense of the project of degrowth.

In our argumentative process we will make special reference to the declination of the theory of degrowth supplied by Serge Latouche (2007). Not simply because of the authority of the writer, but especially because Latouche’s theory – in evoking the idea of a “society of degrowth” (as opposed to the mere “economy of degrowth”) – is that which, more than any other, has clearly made room for subtle thinking on the anthropological substratum of the project. Despite the fact that, exactly by reason of the opening, Latouche has been accused by the most demanding modernist theorists (Cheynet 2006) of winking treacherously at archaic and old-fashioned social repertoires, we will highlight, instead how his anthropological reference picture does not draw away at all from the foundation imagination of the present time (the same as the one of the society of growth) and that this very circumstance determines the unsustainability of an alternative project. In this sense, if our criticism applies to Latouche, it will apply more so to those, among the supporters of degrowth, who completely exclude the anthropological dimension from their own theoretical horizon, thus postulating an adherence by default to the imaginary bases of the present.

2. *The anthropological homogeneity between the growth society and the degrowth society*

In order to find out the anthropological content of the alternative of degrowth, we must clearly devote ourselves to the “propositional” side of the project, that which outlines the features of the society yet to come. In particular, the so-called agenda of the “eight Rs”: *re-evaluate, re-conceptualize, re-structure, re-distribute, re-locate, reduce, re-use, recycle*. If we took this path, demonstrating our thesis would be far too simple. The type of man able to sustain similar guiding principles is undoubtedly the same at the foundation of the society of development and growth: none but the “modern man”.

It would be easy, for instance, to demonstrate that the objective of “stationariness” (expressed by the mottos: “reduce”, “re-use”, “recycle”), aimed at ensuring the reproducibility of renewable resources and the reduction to a minimum of the exploitation of non-renewable resources, is pursued through a process of self-containment (not via acts of squandering compensation, as the wisdom of pre-modern societies would have it, inappropriately recalled). We mean to say that we are claiming a device of unlimited valorisation, with the purpose of forever perpetuating the utilitarian statute of goods and certainly not of suspending it.

It would be easy to demonstrate that the orientation to the “reduction” (of “useless and harmful” productions) is not a downward blow against the devil of productivism but the Trojan horse of integral rationalisation, which tends to eliminate even the remaining anti-utilitarian outposts of the present time (such as “perfumes” or “advertising”). At the foundation of these instances there is an anthropological constitution imbued deeply with the unilinear utilitarian logic of temperance, of self-control, of the rationality of exchanges, despite all unjustifiable prefiguration of inebriating states of joy.

It would be easy to show that the catalogue of values of the degrowth society (altruism, cooperation, play, sociality, localism, beauty, etc.), spelt out under “re-evaluate”, is superimposable, incredibly

enough, almost entirely on another well-known catalogue of values - the one compiled by David Riesman (1950) in the work *The lonely crowd*, which describes the reference value horizon of man produced by the society of consumption. That is to say that the imaginary bases of the man of degrowth are the same as those of the consumerist ideal-type.

It would be easy, finally, not to recognise in the slogan “re-localise” a return *saint-simonism* in which citizenship is given to the only dimension of the “real production”, so that each community takes on the whole burden of its own livelihood, by self-producing all kinds of necessary goods (Latouche 2007, 33). An autarchy achieved even at the level of the municipality, which, as all economies of this kind, would end up by asking its own members (beyond any initial good wish) a work-centred overcommitment without any respite and/or a desperate status of deprivation. Autonomy, self-sufficiency, “relying exclusively on one’s own strength”, control over all segments of social and economic life are typical modern aspirations. They represent the will to root the “Robinson Crusoe” model in any place, a model that is actually reported in the sociology of literature as the foundation account of modernity.

This construction not only leaves modern imagination untouched, but it is also pervaded by a deep internal contradiction that makes it impossible to implement. This is clarified especially when examining what Latouche defines as “local political utopia”. Around the democratic anthropology taken as the basis of the project, there is an embroidery of straitjackets as necessary as unbearable for that anthropology. Once the devil of autonomy is awakened, it is truly deceptive to think that you can confine it within some special, value-related or even “thematic” constraints. We cannot understand how these constraints can be made to stand without heavily violating the same democratic principle.

Just to clarify, why should the single territorial units be within the dimension suggested by Latouche (thirty-thousand inhabitants)? Who has the power to sanction any possible excess?

Why should a free citizen, even one living in a democratic arena, choose to stay put within his own original community, rather than undertaking, as it is easily predictable, the path of mobility, of discovery of other places and other people?

The “re-location” espoused by Latouche seems to be dangerously similar to the historical process of affirmation of the “western city”, as analysed by Max Weber (1999, pp. 351-376). The foundation moment of the city matches with an act of breaking away from the centres of imperial power. The city communities endow themselves with independent institutions and, at the same time, start to work for economic self-sufficiency, producing by themselves all the necessary goods that meet the needs of the community (a necessary undertaking, since the interruption of the flow of resources redistributed by bureaucracy at the central level must be made up for). At the same time, an offensive is launched against any encroaching feudal and corporative influence: the immanence of the territorial community against the transcendence of the Empire!

What can we infer? That the institutional ingredients at the basis of degrowth are the same that have historically given birth to western modernization: growth, development, omni-marketization - in short, to the world against which we intend to fight. We are thus facing the old game that proposes the “good” modernity of the origins as a therapy for the present “bad” modernity, which really exists. What makes us think that the same institutional and imaginary structure can produce a different outcome?

We expect that a given political-territorial architecture (the localist one) necessarily engenders and reproduces a specific political agenda (that which is enclosed in the formula of “ecologic democracy”)... We deceive ourselves that once a community has been made democratic and independent, it will spontaneously attain the “good” values of sobriety, measure, the “small-is-beautiful” principle, etc.

It is a genuine “ontology of spontaneity”, that reappears in many passages of the theory of degrowth¹. As in the myth of the *bon sauvage* by Rousseau, we persuade ourselves that in “letting the men be”, in a regime of perfect immanence, they will always pursue the good and the right. Therefore, every inferior trend could be attributed exclusively to the influence of loutish “powers” to annihilate.

There are not many traces of the reliability of this ontology. On the other hand, the “truly existing localism” has so far produced quite a few night patrols against immigrants and prostitutes, as well as several fires in the gipsy camps, with the aim of ensuring hygiene in our pretty communities. If the project is about radical democracy, we cannot then complain, in the long run, about the loss of a “common vision”, of irrationality of exchanges, of the phenomena of anomy, etc. The institutional-imaginary picture supplied by democratic anthropology prevails over any value-related constraint and produces the triggering of a dynamics of alienation that does not constitute a “betrayal of the origins”, but rather their perfect fulfilment. In particular, if the project is about radical democracy, degrowth (or a-growth, whatever we want to call it), cannot be a foundation, for the same reason as the degrowth advocates do not believe that “growth” should be a foundation. Both “proposals” are bound to merge in the melting pot of the thousand options that cross the democratic regime. Growth and degrowth, in this sense, rest in the same paradigm of the autonomous subject: their validity is a function of the historical contingencies and neither of them can aspire to the throne of constitutional dogma.

3. What man for which type of degrowth?

The criticism of the eight “Rs” programme, however, risks confining all the discourse within one superficial area. Venturing into the construction of a political proposal is a generous attempt (which

¹ Speaking about school education, Latouche declares for instance: “we should not enter the brain of our children, but we must give them confidence so as they can themselves find their own way...” (2007, p. 105).

is to be credited to Latouche anyway), but it is nevertheless daring, hence by its own nature exposed to easy reprimands.

We believe, instead, that the issue of degrowth bears with it some basic problems relating to its critical position, which keenly anticipate the propositional front (and which are at the origin of the many leaks of the proposition as mentioned above). It is the sense itself of “degrowth” that has to be more deeply examined and reasserted. Once again, we have to ask ourselves: “What is the use of degrowth?” Or rather: “Why do we object to growth?”

According to Latouche, the regime of “growth for growth” has to be condemned, first of all because it is a threat to life itself. Disputing it helps preserve the possibility of the survival of the planet and its people, since a regime of unlimited growth is incompatible with the quantity of non-renewable resources available, and with the speed of regeneration of the biosphere for renewable resources.

Hence:

“... a radical change is an absolute need ... in order to prevent a brutal and tragic catastrophe” (Latouche, 2007, p. 10).

The defence of “life for life”, regardless of and before any question on the sense of life, is launched here as a value in itself, an undisputable moral imperative, that does not need any justification whatsoever. The impending catastrophe does not allow us to indulge in similar questions... But there is a much deeper reason explaining this omission: the subordination of degrowth to the main article of faith of the modern-western imaginary colonialism (disguised, as usual, as a universal dogma, extra-historical and extra-geographic). That is to say: the sacredness of life in itself. This imperative translates the “neutralitarian” root of utilitarian political philosophy²: democracy and freedom demand an a-teleological Politician who would never interfere with the construction of the sense of associated life, since this is but the spontaneous result of the interaction among individuals, who alone are given the sovereignty in formulating and fulfilling their own existential project. In such conditions, politics cannot but have a function of mere guarantee for preservation (“life for

² As we know, Bentham argued that the political institution was supposed to deal with the happiness of the great majority, but without ever getting into the concept of happiness chosen by each one. For some people happiness is making money, for others it might be writing poetry... We often forget this pivotal idea of utilitarianism, blindly reducing the doctrine to a monomaniac inclination to the useful intended in a merely economic sense.

life”) or, even better, for cultivation (“growth for growth”) of the “organic” life of citizens, combined with the administrative regulation of their circulation. We need to limit ourselves to making life grow, so that the living being can be free to do whatever he wishes with it. Originally, therefore, growth is nothing but the translation of the modern principle of neutrality: it is “rightly” indifferent to whatever aim, except for that of increasing the material possibilities of each one to choose and achieve one’s aims. In this sense, the principle of “growth for growth” is equivalent to the principle of “life for life”. They are mutually pleonastic. The former can be said to be nothing but a euphoric declination of the latter. For decades we have bet that the best way to defend and sustain life was to head for growth. Today, someone is warning us that this strategy is insufficient when not harmful: therefore, it would be better to head for degrowth. The strategy changes but the goal is the same: life beyond any “sense” whatsoever. The neutralitarian regime that we pretend to fight (by candidly denouncing the lack of purposes in growth) is fully reconfirmed. Degrowth does not produce any epistemological difference compared with the utilitarian fundamentals of the growth society.

These considerations are confirmed by the approach of the second axis of criticism against the growth society: the one devoted to its “social” unsustainability. The rise of the GDP, Latouche warns us, produces unhappiness and weakens relations. The well-having causes a reduction of well-being. It is interesting not to cast doubt on the truth of the assumption but on its paradoxical feature. That is, the fact that it leaves the model of western life basically immune, referring however to a concept of life based on the unlimited, infinitely positive quest for “being better and better”. Modernity has never encouraged having more for having more, but having more for being better. It seems, therefore, entirely superfluous to state:

“It is a question of... striving for a better quality of life and not for an unlimited growth of the GDP” (Latouche, 2007, p.62).

“... we have to make the ‘well-having’ measured by economic indicators decrease in order to better the ‘well-being’ really experienced” (*Ivi*, p. 98).

The criticism by Latouche fits within a more general instance typical of the “reflexive modernity” (Beck *et al.*, 1994). That instance which saves modernity in itself, denouncing some drifts that make contemporary society different from its original project. The ultimate goal still remains the quest for immanent well-being: the fact that it can be obtained by increasing the resources produced, decreasing them or, even, stopping to deal with them, is a detail that certainly does not challenge the model of society. The wishing scheme, of heading for the highest satisfaction possible - briefly, the anthropological and imaginary structure of modernity, remains completely untouched.

Under these conditions, the strategy of degrowth works only as an artificial breathing device in order to keep a now-exhausted model of society alive.

It is, therefore, urgent to radically rethink the sense of degrowth and, in this vein, it seems to us essential to refer back to the lesson of a great classical author, Georges Bataille (1967, 1976a, 1976b), whose proto-arguments against the growth society remain, in our opinion, unsurpassed³. His “general economy” warns us that only a very small amount of the available and circulating energy can be used for the growth of the living system. Inversely, we can state that it is that same capacity for growth of the system to be limited, along with the possibility of a “useful” use of energy. The problem is still the same: the excess energy. That is, what to do with it once the capacity for absorption of the system has run out. The reaching of the limit is a crunch time, because it closes the phase in which the living being can be concentrated on a “necessary” activity, by doing away with the thought and the thematization of the sense of one’s own working. Until the growth process runs out, the living being will behave like a robot: in a sense, he is on this side of the human, without any qualified goal. But once the threshold of satisfaction has been reached, he has to tackle the nihil, the vacuum. The lack of spontaneous “natural” indications on how to use energy, to what purpose to devote it, raises the problem of a system with a vast range. The utilitarian logic, when it gets reflexive, becomes unliveable, because it reveals the inhumane and

³ It is clear that what we are proposing is not a philology of the theory of *dépense* and of the ‘accursed share’, but a completely personal interpretation, certainly not bound to be subscribed to the numerous specialists of Bataille’s thought in their own right.

subservient substance. The existence of unused, suspended and circulating energy, represents the threat of non-sense that looms near the living being. This is what makes the “waste” necessary. The exceeding energy is to be cleared, cancelled, for it is in itself an element of anxiety. The operation can take many shapes. The pure and simple waste, which once occurring gives us back the condition of de-thinking that stems from being involved in a growth activity. The sacrificial act: in which a living being or a property is destroyed and at the same time made sacred. Destroyed as a “useful thing”, that is, taken away from its servile function and therefore summarised at the sacred level. Through this ritual of *dépense*, human societies make sense, emancipating themselves from the utilitarian motive, in itself inadequate to keep them together. The utilitarian does not require common intents: the unique features can remain symbolically separate, since they circulate under the emergency register of the search for survival. After trespassing on it, we need to find a reflected and shared sense of community again, which can be obtained by destroying the utilitarian statute of bodies and things. That is how *dépense* takes on a strategic position. We can say that the ultimate purpose of the living being is destruction. The aim of being is not *existence* but *dépense*.

Catastrophe, if we dare speak in this key, is not at all a problem, but a natural destination. The problem is how to make sense of this destruction, how to make it again a moment in time when a community is sacralized and acquires meaning. We should not, hence, fear catastrophe, but rather its de-qualification, its offering itself as a mere “natural” calamity, not worked out by man.

Growth is not condemned for threatening life, but because it is not adequate for catalysing the excess energy. If Latouche, though contesting the regime of “growth for growth”, still indulges in the positive and unilinear track of the quest for well-being, Bataille points to the need for reversion that is, the cancellation of any perspective of unlimited promotion, quantitative and/or qualitative of the living being in itself. The logic of “life for life”, in neglecting this need, is exposed to an even more ruinous fate than that of “growth for growth”. Energy, in fact, remains suspended and circulating with its own load of non-sense to threaten the social existence (long before the physical

one). The challenge, therefore, is in requalifying the paths of waste, and not preserving a too-preserved and immobile existence, as it looms on the horizon of the “degrowth society”.

Latouche, paraphrasing Arendt, has often argued that “there is nothing worse than a growth society without any growth”. Well, paraphrasing her further, we argue that “there is nothing worse than a society of sense without any sense”.

The society of degrowth is certainly a society of sense, for it is based on the anthropology of the disclosure of an immanent, autonomous, conscious subject, intent on his/her well-being. This posture, free from any transcendent guidance, exposes the individual to a continuous search for sense. In a society of growth, the exposure to sense is structurally delayed due to the reabsorption of the subject in the undertaking of growth. A further tool is that of the practices of *dépense* which in our societies are mainly exhibited in the narrowness of private rooms. These elusive strategies are undoubtedly unsatisfactory, but prove to be functional anyway for turning our attention away from the vacuum produced by the anthropology of disclosure. Latouche continues to bet on the same anthropological pattern, transferring it, however, to a framework of stagnation of the production commitment and of the wishing duress. A frustrating solution. In the society of degrowth we find ourselves naked in the face of the chasm of non-sense.

This is implicitly acknowledged by Latouche, when he states that:

“Without a re-enchantment of life, degrowth itself would be bound to fail” (Latouche, 2006, p. 154).

Evoking the need for “re-enchantment”, however, does not lead to an adequate thematization. It only shows an opportunity through which Latouche reaffirms his own belief that life is sufficient in itself, that one can simply be in “life for life”. The re-enchantment comes to being, then, a mere contemplation of the thing in itself, with a beauty that gives itself spontaneously and which alone (or maybe with the help of a skilful creative expert) fills the vacuum.

The truth is that enchantment is incompatible with the autonomous-democratic character of the society of degrowth. The truth is that Latouche fights for an ever less enchanted, more aware, responsible, wise subject.

4. Conclusion

We need, instead, to take enchantment seriously. As an immobilization, liberation from thought (de-thinking). It is the only way out for the man who, once he has taken the path of disclosure, finally finds himself facing the non-sense, incapable therefore of using his own energy of living being. Growth is not enough any longer to free us from thought: we need to acknowledge it and adopt new strategies. Thus the alternative of degrowth is necessary, but in its current form it would be a worst-of-all remedy, since resuming the anthropology of disclosure would produce nothing but the exposure of man to the absolute immanence of life. That is, to its non-sense. It would leave the energy of the living being suspended and without any prospect for use (either useful or un-useful).

An alternative to degrowth should instead challenge re-enchantment. To this aim, the concept of degrowth has to be radically dis-economized. We need to reinterpret the undertaking of degrowth, first of all, as an overturning of the process of unlimited promotion and valorization of the living being: the opposite of the increase of awareness proposed by Latouche. This requires that *dépense* is brought back to a collective level, by delving into the question of power: that is, the construction of a transcendent entity, operator of the waste. A construction which, far from threatening democracy, would contribute to revitalizing it, entrusting it with the invention and fulfilment of political objectives that would closely involve the members of a community.

It is not a radical or esoteric alternative. It is but a return to classic authors. For instance, to that “charismatic power” which according to Weber (1922) has the quality of breaking the logic of the selfish and utilitarian interest, to which the anthropology of the disclosing immanence necessarily leads. It has the quality of creating a community and tracing a destiny, freeing the individuals from the grip of a vacuum. It is a return to Durkheim in *The elementary forms of religious life*, who

stresses the need to control the “vertigo of sense”. That is to say, the locking in the safe of the sacred a number of fundamental precepts for social cohesion, thus removing them from the annihilating screening of conscience, of omnivorous reason, of ruling protagonism.

We need a power to which to entrust the periodical requisition of the social product (generally speaking, from material to symbolic production) and its shared destruction, collectively operated: so as to take it away from the utilitarian logic and, in this way, sacralizing it. That means, therefore, requalifying and resocializing *dépense*, in the framework of a new “consumerist communism”, which on the one hand ensures individual existence by protecting the individuals by the market and the rigour of self-production, and on the other clears the excess energy, preventing the vacuum of sense from spreading.

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