

Towards a cultural revolution

– How critical and practice theories can help us to decolonize the growth imagery

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ABSTRACT

Van den Bergh (2011) recently reviewed political and technical changes suggested by degrowth scholars, and advocated for a collection of policy measures to improve societal sustainability. We, however, agree with Kallis (2011) that a transformation towards a sustainable society requires a more drastic cultural revolution (see also Latouche 2004, 2010, 2011; Bayon et al. 2010; Aries 2010; and Lavignotte 2009).

The central premise is that our current ecological and social predicament cannot be cured if we do not solve the cultural crisis – the fact that our mental environment is colonised by the imagery of economic growth. We feel, however, that degrowth discussants often lack a common basis for debating the necessary cultural transformation. First, there are multiple, partly contradictory analyses of what it is that is harmful in our culture. Second, there is a lack of social theoretical understanding of what constitutes imagery and how we should approach cultural change.

In this paper we provide an overview of the culturalist sources of degrowth thinking and sketch a way forward. We first take a look at the critical theory of the Frankfurt school as a potential basis. Then we take a look at the so-called practice turn in contemporary social theory and its potential.

Critical theory analyses society in the light of its used and unused or abused capabilities for improving the human condition (Kellner, 2002). Authors contributing to this school of thought, such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas or Erich Fromm, have offered similar arguments for a cultural revolution. The Frankfurt school tends to highlight contradiction, conflict and different forms of exploitation from strongly ideological perspectives. While degrowth proponents share many of these analyses, there is also a strong focus on the symbolic and an appreciation of the ongoing quest for good life.

We argue that practice theories offer another way forward. Practice theorists generally take a less ideological or political stance in their analysis. They also place more emphasis on language and discursive practices, in addition to materiality. The practice turn (Schatzki, 2001) builds on philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hubert Dreyfus, and on social and cultural theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and Michel Foucault. It seeks to eschew the old dichotomies of individualist/societal and micro/macro, and to understand the material in connection with the social.

The practice approach focuses attention on social practices, which are routinely performed and consist of both material and mental elements. According to this perspective, the practices provide the basis for our shared understanding rather than individual cognitions, a single overarching societal imagery or a collection of formal institutions. Consequently, our worldview and imagery are inherent in the social practices through which we carry out our daily lives. The current imagery is only sustained through us performing these practices. The space for cultural change can be brought about by questioning habitualized ways of thinking and doing. Decolonizing the growth imagery, from this perspective, refers to fostering cultural diversity – an ability to carry out a multitude of practices beyond economic growth.

Practice theory provides researchers a framework for analyzing the needed transformation of culture and imagery. For politicians, it highlights the need to understand wide sets of practices beyond formal laws, regulations and policies. Degrowth practitioners are regarded as a major source for cultural change and for learning about it.

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“Methods of dulling the capacity of critical thinking are more dangerous to our democracy than many of the open attacks against it.”

Fromm (2004/1942: 111)

1. Introduction

The international degrowth movement has recently addressed the multidimensional facets of the current ecological, economic, and social crisis that the world is experiencing (Van den Bergh, 2011; Kallis, 2011). The crisis is a crisis of the system, requiring systemic approaches to understand and envision measures needed for reversing the situation. At the same time, there is abundant evidence indicating that the task of achieving true sustainability lies not only on scientific, technical or economic advances, but on a global cultural shift. This point is stressed by many scholars, not only from within the degrowth movement. Yet, as we will argue in this paper, the discussion could use a more comprehensive theoretical basis for advancing our understanding on the nature and means of the required cultural shift.

Van den Bergh (2011) recently made a review of the political and technical changes or goals suggested by degrowth scholars, and advocates for a collection of policy measures to make the human society more sustainable. Kallis (2011), making a useful reminder of the politically and culturally intertwined nature of the possible change toward sustainability, suggested that the policy changes argued for by Van den Bergh are bound to be ineffective unless accompanied by changes in cultural practices. Kallis implied that the cultural crisis appears to be the overarching one, leading to subsequent social and ecological crises. The most important strategy for advancing global sustainability therefore lies in setting the foundation for a cultural revolution.

We agree with Kallis (2011), as well as other prominent degrowth scholars such as Latouche (2004, 2010, 2011), Bayon, Flipo and Schneider (2010), Aries (2010) and Lavignotte (2009), that a transformation towards a sustainable society requires a more drastic cultural revolution in parallel to the more practical political and technical changes. Latouche (2010: 159), for instance, argues that “a cultural revolution in the true sense of the term is required”. In similar vein, Castoriadis (2005: 244) points out that “for such a revolution profound changes are needed in the psychosocial organization of the occidental man, in his attitude towards life, that is - in his imagery”. Degrowth thus calls for the “decolonization of the imaginary” that is now colonized or occupied by the ideology of economic growth, neoliberalism, and related ideas (Fournier, 2008; Latouche, 2011).

We feel, however, that the degrowth discussion often lacks a proper foundation for debating the necessary cultural transformation. First, there are multiple, partly contradictory analyses of what it is that is harmful in our culture. Second, although the focus on imagery or the cultural crisis seems appropriate, there is a lack of theoretical understanding of what constitutes the imagery and the culture and how they might be changed.

In this work-in-progress paper we sketch a way forward in this debate. We start by anchoring the discussion on the degrowth discourse. We then briefly review how degrowth scholars have addressed the cultural crisis and our need to decolonize the growth imagery. Thereafter we take a look at the critical theory of the Frankfurt school as a potential basis for understanding and dealing with the cultural crisis. We

then take a look at the so-called practice turn in the contemporary social theory and how it has the potential to provide a more solid basis for addressing the practice of decolonizing the growth imagery. Finally, we discuss and conclude with implications and limitations.

2. Degrowth as the enjoyment of life

The detrimental human impact on the earth's ecosystems and the subsequent grim scenarios of species survival for the coming millennia are hardly new for most researchers in the field of ecological economics. More recently, the relationship between the adverse human effect on the ecology and human progress as economic growth has come under critical review in general and more specifically by the so-called degrowth movement (Van den Bergh, 2011; Kallis, 2011). The currently dominant thinking on progress regards economic growth as indispensable for human development and wellbeing. Critics however are worried about the ecological and subsequent social consequences of perpetual economic growth, and have raised the idea that we should instead seek to prosper without perpetual growth.

The degrowth movement, including a range of concerned researchers, activists and politicians, sees economic degrowth as inevitable, which means that degrowth is not really a choice, but an ecological necessity. As Flipo (2008: 27) states, "degrowth is the inevitable consequence of any ecological policy taken seriously". If we were to imagine the realist scenario of a future world where business-as-usual types of activities engendered by the imperative of growth will lead finally to a crisis that will make degrowth unpreventable, the scenery will be one of fear and not one in which the enjoyment of life prevails. The degrowth movement seeks for an alternative, a more positive path.

The paradigmatic proposition of degrowth is that human progress without economic growth is possible (Schneider *et al.*, 2010: 512). One may even go as far as arguing that not only progress without growth is possible, but degrowth has a great potentiality for enhancing the quality of life. Latouche (2010, p.521) refers to this as the decrease of "well-having" in order to improve "well-being". The slogan *moins des biens, plus des liens* (less goods, more relationships) appears frequently in the degrowth literature (Ariès, 2010; Latouche and Harpagès, 2010; Latouche, 2010), pointing to life improvement that can be generated by replacing the man–things relationships with the man–man relationships, in the very same sense that Karl Polanyi indicated in *The Great Transformation* (2001).

Although degrowth is about living sustainably in this planet, degrowth is anchored in humanist values. Its various proponents are "at pain to show that their concerns are primarily with human values and social justice rather than ecological values" (Fournier, 2008: 536). For instance, Castoriadis indicated that "we should want a society where the economical values ceased being central (or unique), where the economy is put back in its place, (...) not only necessary for avoiding the definitive destruction of the terrestrial environment, but as well and mostly for escaping the physical and moral misery of the contemporary humans" (1996: 96). Ariès, echoing the same message, insisted that degrowth is a choice that its defenders would make without the oncoming ecological crisis, "simply to be humans" (2005: 31). Likewise, Latouche (2004: 92) indicated that social survival and biological survival are closely linked and that "degrowth should be pursued not only for preserving the environment,

but as well and maybe mostly for restoring the minimum social justice without which the planet is condemned to explosion”.

Not only the intellectual and grass-root degrowth movements are sharing the humanist perspective, but the political one as well. For example, the French Degrowth Party defines itself as “humanist”. Also, it is not at all a simple coincidence that the French monthly publication *La Décroissance* is *The journal of joy of living* or that the important degrowth initiatives in Italy are united into a *Movement for Happy Degrowth* (Pallante, 2010). Nonetheless, one should be careful in making this point as humanism can easily be associated with the ecologically and possibly also socially detrimental occidental humanism (Latouche, 2011: 147 – 157).

It is evident that degrowth is not aimed at for the sake of degrowth. Degrowth does not represent a finality *per se* but a means towards a better future. Degrowth does not *aim at* a shrinking economy, although a shrinking economy may be the *consequence of* taking necessary steps toward prospering sustainably on this planet. Within the degrowth discourse finality is often represented by a future in which the majority of people have the opportunity and the capability of enjoying a good life. In its simplest form this quest can be shortened as “prosperity without growth” (Jackson, 2009). Thus, one of the main characteristic of the degrowth, if not its core one, is the quest for a high quality of life that moves the focus from *more* to *better*, addressing the dichotomy of *having* and *being*, and challenging the significant distinction between the qualitative and the quantitative assets in one’s life.

The emphasis on the joy of living, or good life, indicates that degrowth does not represent contraction, regression, recession or negative growth but a means towards the enjoyment of life (Jackson, 2009; Latouche, 2010; Kallis 2011). This notion was made early by Georgescu-Roegen, who described it as the true product of the economic process, together with the natural resources: “The material stock of natural resources is depleted (...) during the economic process”, but it would be “utterly absurd to think that the economic process exists only for producing waste. The irrefutable conclusion is that the true product of that process is an immaterial flux, the enjoyment of life” (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971: 18).

Degrowth thus aims at a great transformation, a positive one, reflected by the dual conversion of the human position in relation with its natural and artificial environment. Respectively, we need a reconsideration of human relationships with nature and all other things and beings – be they natural or manmade – to enhance human life. Man needs to regain freedom from the imperative or culture of growth, to escape his order as a simple cog in the economic and technological *megamachine*, and to regain the capacity for approaching economy and technology as means, not as ends in themselves.

3. The necessary cultural shift: decolonizing the growth imagery

Achieving true sustainability lies not only on scientific, technical or economic advances, but on a global mindset or socio-cultural shift (Fournier 2008; Kallis 2011; Latouche 2004, 2010, 2011; Bayon *et al.* 2010; Aries 2010; Lavignotte 2009; Castoriadis 2005). Policy changes, even radical ones, are bound to be ineffective unless accompanied by changes in cultural practices (Kallis 2011). For instance, in his 8 “Rs” path towards degrowth, Latouche starts with *re-evaluation* and *re-conceptualisation* as steps toward this shift (2010: 151-180). The cultural crisis appears to be the overarching one leading to subsequent social and ecological crises, which means that advancing sustainability requires a cultural revolution.

Castoriadis, one of the most quoted precursors of degrowth movement, was among the firsts to approach the concept of 'imagery'. He wrote about the "imaginary foundation of societies" (1975/1999), referring to the societies being founded upon a basic conception of the world and man's place in it. He argued that "we need the creation of a new imagery of unparalleled importance in the past, a creation that brings to the centre of the human life other meanings than the expansion of production and consumption" (1996: 96) and that "for such a revolution profound changes are needed in the psychosocial organization of the occidental man, in his attitude towards life, that is - in his imagery" (2005: 244). Latouche has recently used this terminology stating that "the realization of a degrowth society implies to a large extent the decolonisation of our imagery, in order to be able to change the world before the world changes us" (Latouche, 2011b: 7).

The imagery represents "an ideological and quasi religious conversion of mentalities" (Latouche, 2011b:12), "the psychosocial organisation of society" or "the attitude towards life" (Castoriadis, 2005: 244). Societies are shaped by a "liquidity of collective imagery" (Castoriadis, 2005) and "social systems, unlike physical and biological ones, are characterized by the capability to negotiate meanings and to react according to what may be defined as a shared imagery" (Bonaiuti, 2007: 1). This is why degrowth proponents often argue against the use of the 'sustainable development' terminology since – even though it adds ecological and social dimensions to development – sustainable development takes the goal of perpetual economic growth for granted being locked in the imagery of perpetual economic growth.

In line with what degrowth authors are advocating as exemplified above, one of their most important precursor, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, insisted as well on the need of recognition of the role of cultural tradition in the economic process. While the dissipation of energy goes automatically everywhere, the way the production and consumption are planned and performed depend upon the cultural matrix of the societies in question, as the Romanian scientist underlined. The human evolution "works its way through the cultural tradition, not only through technological knowledge" (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971: 19).

The main argument here is that the global crises we are facing are reflections of our collective culture – the mental environment that is colonized by a specific imagery, the imagery of the growth economy and progress as economic growth. In other words, the "success" of the global economic growth – and the resulting ecologically unsustainable development – can be interpreted as the result of the domination of a specific imagery. Other crises, namely socio-economic and ecological ones, are rather crises that result from this one-sided growth imagery. With the words of Lewis Mumford, "the inner crisis of our civilization must be resolved if the outer [ecological and socio-economical] crisis is to be effectively met" (quoted by Alexander, 2011: 1).

The academic, civic and political degrowth movement, therefore, aims at challenging and reforming the currently dominant culture or imagery of 'growth'. Jarrige (2011: 16-17) puts it very clear: "Contrary to what its declared opponents pretend to believe, degrowth is neither a determined economical program nor an ensemble of political measures. It means in the first place attempts, that some believe vain, for formalizing an alternative imagery. It reposes on a central and decisive affirmation confirmed by the contemporary social sciences: the deadly industrial world of today is neither evidence nor necessity, but the historical product

of an ensemble of power rapports that crystallized in cultural representations. Degrowth means interrogating this imagery and attempting its disruption”.

Degrowth wants to liberate people from the socio-economic imagery perpetuated by the imperative of growth. The currently dominant imagery can be interpreted as a mental pollution that creates delusions, traps the human visions, reference systems and critical apparatuses, annihilates cultural diversity through monoculturization and standardization, and erodes the full potential of the human psyche. One needs to escape the current imagery. This requires the decolonization of the culture of “more is better”. A “less is more” frame is postulated.

The target of this critique and its subsequent postulation are now fairly evident. However, what this discussion lacks is a substantial theoretical base that would allow further elaboration of the needed cultural shift of decolonization of the imagery. What are the causes of the dysfunctional dominant imagery? What can we do about it, and how can we develop an imagery that allows the enjoyment of life without the need for perpetual economic growth? In the remainder of this paper we sketch possible theoretical bases toward answering these questions.

4. Critical theory of the Frankfurt school

Critical theory of the so-called Frankfurt school offers a potential departure for taking the discussion further on the necessary cultural shift and decolonizing the growth imagery. Authors that contributed to the development of this school of thought, such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas and Erich Fromm, have offered similar arguments for cultural revolution now being made by the degrowth scholars. However, it seems that only Bayon, Flipo and Schneider (2010: 32) have acknowledged recently that degrowth has important antecedents in the theoretical works of the Frankfurt school.

The Frankfurt school helps us to examine critically what defines us as human beings, what are our limits and powers, what are the *true* human values, how we can enhance them, etc. The devotion towards finding answers to these questions will lead to a betterment of human life, inasmuch as “the struggle for truth is the essentially human project” (Marcuse, 1964/2002: 129). This struggle is echoed in the argument made by Ariès that we need degrowth “simply to be humans” (2005: 31).

Marcuse considered that because of the historical nature of our relationship with the natural world, “‘liberation from nature’ cannot mean returning to a pre-technological stage, but advancing to the use of the achievement of technological civilization for freeing man and nature from the destructive abuse of science and technology in the service of exploitation” (Marcuse, 1972: 60, quoted by Dobson, 1995: 195). This is the very same position found in the degrowth discourse. For instance, Latouche (2011b: 34) supports this argument by pointing out that “if a radical remise en cause of modernity is necessary, this does not mean that we have to reject all science and all technique”.

The critique of instruments – of science and technology in general – as instruments for advancing the human wellbeing in the detriment of the advancement of human values is central both in the critical theory and degrowth discourses. Ellul (1983) and Marcuse (1964/2002), for instance, referred to the society of their times as a *technicist society*, where technology restructured labour and leisure as well as modes of thought. They denounced that scientific and technological achievements provided humans with the delusion of relentless and limitless growth and of

omnipotence, while in reality we became prisoners of the technicist system: “Human beings are continuously called upon to free themselves from that which constrains and determines them. But whereas previously they were determined by the natural and then sociological (cultural) factors (and they have used Science and Technique to be liberated from these), now they are alienated in what was at one time the means of liberation” (Ellul, 1983: 11). The very same view of man becoming impotent in its quest for omnipotence was shared by Fromm (1978: 153): “We have made the machine into a god and have become godlike by serving the machine (...) Human beings, in the state of their greatest real *impotence* imagine themselves in connection with science and technique to be *omnipotent* “. Thus, in the quest for meeting this limitless end, man became a cog in the vast economic machine (Latouche, 2011b: 55; Fromm, 2004/1942: 95, 1978:2; Marcuse, 1964/2002, Mumford, 1934/2010: 173), a tool for serving a purpose outside himself.

Marcuse (1964/2002) criticized the spirit of the ‘*one-dimensional man*’ for reducing the full potential of humanity to the spheres of economy, work and consumption. He wrote about ‘introjections’ referring to “a variety of relatively spontaneous processes by which a self (ego) transposes the *outer* into the *inner*”. He was concerned that “the productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces “sell” or impose the social system as a whole... the products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life – and as a good way of life, it militates against social change” (Marcuse, 1964/2002: 12). This critique is close to degrowth scholars’ concern regarding the colonization of the imagery, even though Marcuse did not use these particular terms.

At the individual level, as identical images and messages homogenize our perspectives, knowledge, tastes, and desires, homogenization leads to clichéd lives and stereotyped behaviours. And as our culture fosters the tendency to conform, people lose the ability of original, authentic, spontaneous or creative feelings, thoughts and dreams. Moreover, this increased tendency to conform leads to the loss of the self and of identity, disconnection and anomie, to an alienating self-consciousness, transforming the individuals in automatons seen by Marcuse as “the great catalysts of advanced industrial society” (1964/2002: 40). Fromm (2004/1942: 219) argued that “psychologically the automaton, while being alive biologically, is dead mentally and emotionally”, his visions and reference systems (meanings, values) are annihilated. In order to act differently and to build an alternative future, people have to be able to think differently, but in a society that sends inappropriate messages and fosters unsuitable values, it is a true challenge to adopt an alternative, dissident behaviour as degrowth scholars point as well (Latouche, 2011b; Latouche and Harpages, 2010: 52).

Moreover, human beings suffer from a ‘fatal passivity’ (Fromm, 1978: 77), become heteronomous, artificial and without an authentic self. They lose their capacity to critical thinking, have a passive attitude towards their environment and become alienated from themselves, from other human beings and from nature, while always running more for titles, money and things so that the surviving of the *megamachine* is insured. Simply put, inner development of men is sacrificed for the sake of an outer (economic) growth since the development of the economic system does not ask what is good for man but what is good for the growth of the system, a drawback stressed throughout the degrowth literature.

The critical theorists saw the modern society as one without opposition, and stressed the paralysis of criticism due to the blind fate in science and technology. Moreover, they emphasized the double function of the scientific and technological progress – as productive force and as ideology, indicating the objectivist delusion of science. This is an ideological illusion of technicism and positivism, a certain *ideological modernism* (Marcuse, 1964/2002; Habermas, 1973). Specific to this ‘technocratic’ ideology is the absence of alternatives as if there would not be any other choice.

Writing on the character of alienation of the personal relation between men, Fromm (2004/1942: 103) pointed out that “perhaps the most important and the most devastating instance of this spirit of instrumentality and alienation is the individual’s relationship to his own self. Man does not only sell commodities, he sells himself and feels himself to be a commodity”. This injured relationship damages not humans only, but is detrimental to nature as well, which is stressed by Marcuse: “science, in the virtue of its own method and own concepts projected an universe in which the domination of nature remained linked to the domination of man – this link menaces of being fatal for this whole universe (1964/2002 170).

In the quest for an enjoyable life, frugality, conviviality, simplicity are all central dimensions of degrowth. Voluntary simplicity designates the liberation of humans from the non-essential activities that saturate modern life in the consumer and work-oriented culture directed counter to that which enriches and inspires us, for a living in accordance with humans’ most important values, “the condition for an augmented joy of life” (Ridoux, 2006: 97). The enjoyment of life requires a spiritual conversion or renaissance (Haribbey, 2007: 4). The precondition for this is the decolonization of the imagery: the economy has to be subordinated to the needs of people, and humans have to aim at their well-being rather than their well-having by satisfying their healthy needs rather than the pathological ones. In the words of Fromm (1978: 176), “we must put an end to the present situation where a healthy economy is possible only at the price of unhealthy human beings”.

Degrowth should be enabled through a spiritual renaissance. First, humanity needs to realize that happiness lies in the inner development of man being caused by the pleasurable exercise of our faculties (Fromm, 1993: 51, Morris, 1979: 202, 203). The second conversion needed is the one of man’s instrumental relationship with the natural environment. For instance, Illich (1983) stressed that the transformation of the environment from a commons to a productive resource constitutes the most fundamental form of environmental degradation. We need now more than ever to replace this instrumental, exploitative relationship with a fraternal one and to approach the nature not with arrogance but with humbleness.

It is now clear that the Frankfurt school of critical theory is an important antecedent to the arguments made by the degrowth scholars. Both seek for alternatives in thinking and behaviour, in language and ideology, and in man’s relation to science, technology and economy. Both argue that questioning the mainstream and opposing the established order is necessary. Both value the critical description and understanding of what is going on in the society with regard to our collective imagery. Both seek to discover the transformative, individual and collective level practices that can enhance human life.

However, while the critical theory discussed above helps us to see the used and unused or abused capabilities for improving human wellbeing, we see that the Frankfurt school lacks at least two qualities that the degrowth movement needs to move forward. First, the Frankfurt school seems to focus more on describing injured

relations between man and his environment, less on finding out what kinds of positive relations there can be. Second, the discussion seems to omit the question of *how* one can approach the decolonization of the growth imagery or work toward making the cultural shift a reality. How can we proceed to decolonize the growth imagery in research, politics and, say, business? In the next chapter we turn to practice theory and argue that it may provide a way forward.

5. Practice theory

Practice theory does not refer to a unified theory but to an approach underlying certain developments in philosophy as well as in cultural and social theory during the last decades, labelled as *practice turn* by Ted Schatzki (2001). Practice theorizing generally seeks to move beyond the old divides between individualist/societist and micro/macro approaches (Schatzki 2001, Reckwitz 2002). It builds on a strong relation between micro and macro explanations of social order, on the notion that “context and contextualized entity constitute one another” (Schatzki 2005: 468). Practice theorists believe that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human action, power, language, social institutions and historical change transpire in the field of practices and are part of it. Schatzki (2001) defines practices as bodily, materially mediated arrays of doings and sayings that are organized around shared, practical understanding.

Practice theory sees social structures as practices whose realization depends on the people carrying them out and on the material arrangements related to them. The structures are, thus, within the reach of humans while located also outside human body and mind. Practice theory also questions the assumption of rational and detached decision-making by individuals and reminds that the requirements for thinking and doing are built in practices that are historically learned and adopted. The individual is a unique meeting-point of different practices, and her/his knowledge is always tied to shared understandings, bodily skills, technologies and various non-human objects. Only a part of knowledge is explicit and can be described through language.

The approach has much in common with discourse analysis, but the focus is more on doings and non-human elements in additions to sayings. Whereas discursive interpretations generally highlight the structures of meaning in text or talk, practice theory connects the symbolic dimension with the bodily and the material. Language and behavior are treated as dimensions of the same field of practice rather than as separate, interacting parts of human life. According to the practice approach, practices are not something external to us – they are learned and performed here and now. The coexistence of humans and non-humans on this planet is first and foremost practical and mundane, something we carry out day after day.

Through practice theory, we get a sense of how the vast issues identified by the degrowth movement and critical theory, such as the replacement of human relations by market relations, are part of what we habitually do in and outside our working lives. Rather than focusing on a single dominant imagery, it highlights the role of practices and bundles of practices in how we carry out our everyday lives. Importantly, it shows how a single person can fluently carry out fundamentally different, contradicting types of practices, only some of which involve the idea and language of economic growth. From this perspective, decolonizing the imagery refers to, rather than battling with a single overpowering enemy, supporting the real diversity of everyday practices and practicing alternatives to the ones oriented to

economic growth. From within those alternative practices, the practices inherently tied with growth may become seen in their full absurdity.

6. Conclusion

In this work-in-progress paper we have highlighted how ecological and social sustainability is not likely achieved through techno-economic advances alone, but requires a more fundamental cultural shift. This is a revolution that should shake the very foundations of our collective imagery that takes for granted such concepts and goals as “sustainability”, “technology” and “economical growth”. We reviewed how the degrowth movement has recently argued for a decolonization of the currently dominant modern, techno-economic imagery, to achieve prosperity without growth.

Degrowth proponents are not, however, the only ones having this critical stance, nor are they without precedents. We showed how the so called Frankfurt school has offered similar ideas and critique earlier, while their work has been under-cited by degrowth scholars. The Frankfurt school has offered valuable insights relating to the origins and dysfunctionality of collective imageries. We further proposed that the so called ‘practice theory’ that is developing in the fields of cultural, philosophical and social studies offers a further beneficial avenue forward. Namely, by carefully studying the dominant, marginalized and potential everyday practices by which we live or do not live, we can identify ways to decolonize our minds from the current unsustainable, dysfunctional and monoculturalized imagery and push the humanity toward a more multicultural, diverse array of – hopefully sustainable – practices.

Our aim was to study the foundations of the cultural critique offered the degrowth movement. We did this by focusing our discussion on the notion of ‘imagery’ and the need for cultural revolution rather than techno-economic evolution. Our discussion helps to anchor future discussion on this subject to the preceding ideas by the Frankfurt school, while we also pointed toward practice theory as a promising perspective to deepen our understanding. However, we barely scratched the surface. While we highlighted a number of linkages between degrowth theory, the Frankfurt school, and practice theory, further work is needed to consolidate the three into a more unified theoretical base. Also, while we scouted the usual research databases for texts relating to the notion of ‘imagery’ and degrowth, we may have omitted important works by scholars from other research fields. A more comprehensive bibliographic review cross-referencing various search words, theoretical schools, and research databases would be of benefit.

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