

DEEP ECOLOGY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF DEGROWTH

Abstract

Economic growth was born only in a human culture in a particular moment of its history and is not a "natural push of mankind". It grew up in a culture with a completely anthropocentric background, which considers our species above (out of) Nature and independent from the Ecosystem: it originated from a worldview that sees human activities as possible regardless of their link with the rest of Nature, considered as "human environment". So economic growth does not take into account the way of life of the Earth, based on closed cycles and a steady-state situation.

A culture can persist indefinitely only if it has "modes" of the steady-state type: in present Western civilization degrowth is essential for achieving a transition to a situation of that type, with a number of humans and consumption very lower than the current ones, which are not compatible with Earth Life.

The recently born **Degrowth movement** too often remains on an anthropocentric background. It does not deal with philosophical issues, but an economic degrowth is impossible if you keep an anthropocentric worldview, until you consider man out the Biosphere and unique source of values: so it can be very hard to leave the fixed idea of the perennial increase of material goods.

Ecology as understood by general thought, also known as **shallow ecology**, does not change the background thought of Western culture: it requires only to reduce pollution as much as possible and save some natural areas for the benefit of man. It considers the Earth as the house of man: in essence, everything can go on as before, with some changes and some technical device.

Instead **Deep Ecology** (or **Ecosophy**) is a thought movement, a worldview that requires a background of pantheistic reverence for all sentient beings and for the relationships that connect them to each other and to the so-called "inanimate world". It does not give a particular value to our species, fully considered part of Nature. It is very difficult to accept economic degrowth, as necessary transition to achieve a steady state, without a philosophical base very different from that of present Western civilization, based on a widespread and deep anthropocentrism: what is breathed from birth seems obvious, and therefore does not appear at all.

Substantially, for accepting **degrowth**, we must have a strong transition from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric worldview, that is the idea of **Deep Ecology**, a philosophy that requires a pantheistic reverence for all sentient beings and has for first value the good health of the **Whole Ecosystem**.

Degrowth

The present world is based on economic growth, linear system with only one variable (*money*): it is a phenomenon only possible in a short transient, because it is incompatible with the Biosphere, complex system with a large number of variables. In the Ecosystem only closed loops can exist, while economy picks up and gets out something fixed

(resources and waste). In addition, the current economic system claims to grow indefinitely on a finite planet. The fact that it lasted for two centuries, only means that its end is near, due to the exponential trend of the phenomena. In any case, economic growth **was born only in one human culture** at a particular time of its history and is **not** a "natural urge of mankind." It was born on a particular background of thought, completely anthropocentric: all values are referred only to our species.

A culture can persist indefinitely if it has "mode" of the steady-state type: to-day the Earth necessarily claims a transient decrease for Western civilization for achieving a steady state situation, with a number of humans and amount of consumption very lower than the current ones, that are not compatible with the Earth life.

The *degrowth movement*, born recently, at least in Italy, denies the idea of unlimited economic growth, but has too often completely anthropocentric positions. It don't deal philosophical issues, but economic degrowth is impossible if you keep an anthropocentric background, if you consider man out from the Biosphere and sole reference of values: so you can't leave the push towards an indefinite increase of material goods.

The Movement for Degrowth seeks to raise awareness of the need:

- To live better by consuming less;
- To promote interpersonal relationships based on gift and reciprocity rather than competition;
- To use technologies that reduce energy consumption and waste production.

To achieve these goals it is necessary to develop an alternative paradigm to the present one, that pushed us to the obsession of an unlimited economic growth. The value system as proposed by **Deep ecology** can be very important.

The persistence of the life conditions of the planet, seen as a sentient being, requires that there is no permanent physical growth. Economic growth involves replacing the natural world, rich in species and relationships among the living, with a world completely made of artificial machinery and few degenerate species. Therefore, it is to "remake the world", which is the result of an evolutionary process that lasted four or five billion years. It is clear that economic growth cannot exist during a good Earth Life.

We can note that the terms *growth* and *development* have not the same meaning but are used as synonyms from all the economic-political-industrial world.

Deep Ecology

The idea of economic growth, which comes from the inexhaustible desire for material goods, has developed into a culture with a thought background completely anthropocentric, which considers our species as detached and outside of Nature, as independent from the ecosystem: it was born by a worldview that sees human activities as possible regardless of their connection to the rest of Nature, viewed as "man's environment." So economic growth does not take into account the Earth Life, based on closed cycles and steady state conditions.

Ecology as understood by general thought, also known as *shallow ecology*, is completely anthropocentric and therefore does not change the present thought background all over the world: it requires only to reduce pollution as much as possible and save some intact areas *for the benefit of man*. It thinks the Earth is the home of man: in essence, everything can go on as before, with some small changes and some technical device.

Deep Ecology (or *Ecosophy*) is a philosophical movement, a worldview with a pantheist background that requires a deep respect for all sentient beings (and thus ecosystems) and all the relationships that connect them to each other and to the so-called "not-living" world. It does not assign an independent and particular value to our species, but considers

mankind as a part of Nature, sees the Earth as the body to which we belong. The founder of the movement in the West was the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who used the term for the first time in an article in 1972 (*The shallow and the deep*).

The main basis of Deep Ecology are:

- A systemic vision of the world, a non-dualistic philosophy, the recognition of the sacredness of the Earth and the right to a good life for all sentient beings;
- The need not to break up the universal, to value the global systemic and avoid falling into dualisms like mind and matter, God and world, man and nature, and the like ones;
- The idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In a holistic view we must put the emphasis more on relationships than on individual components.

Ecology is the deep feeling that everything is connected, we cannot damage a part without damaging the whole, we are part of a real Entity (the Ecosystem, or the Earth) along with all other living-sentient beings: the first value is the welfare of Ecosystem, from which it follows its components', and therefore the ours.

We are part of the world we live in as much as rivers and trees, woven of the same intricate flow of matter-energy-mind.

Even in a more "materialistic" view, which considers only the Earth as a complex system, without thinking of mental implications, the practical effects do not change much: in each case moving from a linear way of thinking to a systemic-holistic way is essential.

In summary, Deep Ecology asks for a complete paradigm shift compared to that released today, a change that leads to:

- a conscious feeling of the network that connects any being or event;
- the end of desire for material goods;
- A compassion-love towards all sentient beings.

The ideas of Deep Ecology are a prerequisite for understanding the philosophical sense of the changes to the general perception that they are able to carry on a practical level, first an economic decrease and then a passage to a steady state condition, for saving the Earth from the big dangers that is currently running.

Deep ecology - as a philosophy of life - was not born in the seventies by the ideas of Arne Naess, or some minority today movement: three thousand years in India, and even earlier in many animist cultures, ideas very different from those who then fashioned Western civilization had been able to spread into the collective mind, as these thoughts say, from ancient Indian texts: **"Every soul must be respected and soul means any order, any vitality that the substance can take: the wind is a soul that is imprinted in the air, the river takes a soul in water, a soul in fire, all of this should not be disturbed."** In one of the *sutras* we praise those who respect wind because know the pain of living things: to harm the Earth is to attack and mutilate a living being.

From India again:

Rivers, oh dear, run the Eastern to the east, the Western westward. Came from the ocean blue, they return back and become one with the ocean. Water cannot recall it being this or that river, that's right, dear, the living who have come from Being, do not know they come from Being. Whatever they are here on Earth - man, tiger, lion, wolf, worm, butterfly - they continue their existence as *Tat*. Whatever this subtle essence, all the Universe is made of it, it is the true reality, it is the *Atman*. It is you, oh Svetaketu.
(*Chandogya Upanishad*, 10 ° *khand*)

Conclusions

It will be very hard to accept that there will be economic **degrowth** as transitional necessary to achieve the required steady state, compatible with the Life of the world,

without a philosophical basis and thought quite different from that of today Western civilization, based on anthropocentrism so widespread and deep as not to appear even more: what is breathed from birth seems obvious, does not appear. It is necessary to have a system of values very different from the current one of Western civilization, which has now spread around the world.

In essence, the acceptance of degrowth requires to abandon the anthropocentric philosophy and adopt an **ecocentric** worldview, that is the idea of **Deep Ecology**, a pantheist philosophic background that requires a deep respect for all sentient beings and has as its first value the welfare of the ecosystem as a whole.

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