

## Degrowth and buen vivir (living well): a critical comparison

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A dialogue on the concepts of *degrowth* and *living well* [“buen vivir”, “vivir bien”] seems necessary and could be very informative. Such a dialogue should explore what both concepts have in common (particularly their critique of development: skepticism regarding its promises and its presumed universalism), as well as the specific and most important characteristics of each (references to the limits to growth and environmental sustainability in the case of degrowth and the connotations of cultural identity and community orientation in the case of living well, etc.), paying attention to potential areas of disagreement, conflict and incompatibility. This is the aim of this text; it is not meant to provide a definitive analysis, but to participate in an exchange of views that is already happening.

### **Raising the issue: Remembering a conversation in Quito**

My starting point is very subjective; it is related to a very minor episode, an anecdote, which I have never forgotten. It was a few years ago in Quito, in the stimulating framework offered for these types of discussions by the local programs for development of the Politecnica Salesiana University. In front of a group that included a significant number of local indigenous leaders and activists, I had criticized sustainable development, emphasizing the natural limits to growth and the likelihood of degrowth. One of the participants intervened to point out that the whole idea of limits of the planet and the environment was an idea of the rich countries and ignored the fact that peoples of the Third World still had a great need for economic expansion. In essence, my interlocutor was saying that sustainability reflected a Northern perspective, while development continued to be a fundamental objective of the South. The discussion stalled with the resulting typical misunderstandings. Trying to avoid getting ourselves caught up in these misunderstandings, I pointed out that economic growth was typically given priority in all countries, both those of the South and those of the North. I insisted that ideas cannot be judged based on their origin but that in any case, if we looked at its origin, the idea of development had primarily been a Western idea, the offer and promise made – once the Second World War was over – by capitalist powers to the new states resulting from the process of decolonization. I repeated the clarifying synthesis of the history of development that I had learned from Rist (1997) and Sachs (1996; 2000). I insisted that it was not up to me to tell anyone what they should do and that my only intention was to remind them that if they decided to “stay with development” and reject limits to growth they were in their right to do so, but they should at least understand that they were essentially accepting another European idea, and moreover, the older of the two ideas.

There is nothing new or extraordinary in this type of discussion. Questioning development and, above all, *the expectation of continued development* in the future, has been and continues to be controversial in Ecuador, in Spain and everywhere, and doing so before an audience of development students is almost impossible (and the fact that they are proponents of alternative, humane, socially aware, local development does not alter in the least this assessment; quite the contrary, as they tend to be individuals that already “know how to resolve” the undeniable problems of development).

The commitment to development is essentially the same everywhere, in all countries, rich and poor, left and right. Development settled in our consciousness and became the universal religion of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Television and soft drinks, its Eucharist and education, the practical tool for its legitimacy. If the defense of development has an emotional appeal in certain contexts in the Third World (as it also has in economically deprived areas in rich countries), it is only for symbolic reasons; perhaps questioning development dashes all hope.

This is something I still find surprising, as the origins of the promise of development can still be debated, while on the contrary, there is little doubt that the critique of development has from the beginning been expressed with more strength and persuasiveness in the South. To escape sub-development by imitating the industrialized societies of the West (instead of following the Soviet communists) was the offer Truman made to the elites of post-colonial societies more than 60 years ago. The first ones to understand the inherent falsity of this offer were precisely certain spiritual and political leaders of anti-colonization. To some extent, some of them had anticipated and even understood that neither of the two variants of industrial modernization (capitalist or socialist) could provide an adequate model. Everyone has heard what Gandhi wrote in 1928, in the weekly *Young India*: “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.” Gandhi had said two years before that “to make India like England and America is to find some other races and places of the earth for exploitation”; and he had argued that, given that Western countries had already “divided all the known races outside Europe for exploitation and there are no new worlds to discover,...What can be the fate of India trying to ape the West?” (The quotations from Gandhi are cited in Guha, 2002.)

There is a thread that directly connects the comments of the father of Indian Independence with, for example, Vandana Shiva’s sharp judgment (1989:2): “‘Development’ could not but entail destruction for women, nature and subjugated cultures, which is why, throughout the Third World, women, peasants and tribals are struggling for liberation from ‘development’ just as they earlier struggled for liberation from colonialism.” Similar sentiments can be heard in other recent analyses (Esteva, 1994; Esteva and Prakash, 1998; Sachs and Esteva, 2003). Some of these formulations also have deep roots in European culture, above all in the essential work of Ivan Illich (2004; 2005), but it seems clear to me that there is no basis to state that the critique of development is primarily of European origin.

For many years I have sympathized with this critical current, although more from a perspective of skepticism regarding the part of the world where I was born and have lived than from a universal perspective or militant conviction. In what follows I reproduce a part of something I wrote in 1995. It is a long quote, but it seems an appropriate conclusion to the “declaration of values” (following the advice of Myrdal on such matters) that has served as an introduction to this text:

I have never liked the word “development”. It is very reductionist. It oversimplifies things. We can explain the development of the bicycle or of an organism (although not in the same way). On the other hand, to explain a society, we must talk about its history, which is something quite different. At this moment in history, not many distinctions are made on this point, and this concept of development in politics and sociology has become a fundamental issue, at times, *the* fundamental issue. I do not believe, however, that humanity has a problem with development. The problem is with improving living conditions and ensuring that people have the means to live a life with dignity and freedom. What is called development is, if anything, a means to achieve this end....The era of development as a universal objective throughout the world is now in its fifth decade. In this time, one out of every five human beings has achieved an unprecedented level of material abundance. At the same time, inequality and the number of persons who do not have enough food to eat have reached levels never before seen. In addition, the natural resource base of our species

has been eroded, perhaps irrevocably. The present solution to the dilemmas of social evolution has led [as Seabrook has said (1993:250)] to “improvements” that impoverish and incapacitate increasingly more persons in increasingly more places. This realization should at least lead us to question if development has really been effective after all (Garcia, 1995:45-6).

In the construction of the concept of *living well* it is easy to detect the traces of the now long history of the critique of development. In some way, in the process of formulating and refining this concept, indigenous movements in the Andean region seem to be looking for, among other things, paths that will allow them to go beyond the now worn out and unsuccessful development paradigm. This critique, in addition, is one of the more explicit starting points for *degrowth*. However, I will first try to synthesize my perspective on the two concepts (this may be somewhat redundant; however, given that these concepts are still in construction, it is preferable to be explicit regarding their interpretation to avoid unnecessary confusion).

### **The idea of degrowth (or the “downward slide” of a fossilized civilization)**

The idea of *degrowth* or a decline or descent (*décroissance*, *the way down*) has been fueled in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as we have come to realize that we have surpassed the natural limits to growth, that we have exceeded the Earth’s carrying capacity or are so close to doing so that we cannot avoid *overshooting*. The unavoidable establishment of a new equilibrium on a sustainable scale, both in terms of population and economic activity, will take place through either a more or a less prolonged, disordered and conflictive phase of decline. Alternatively, even if we have still not arrived at this state of overshoot, or if this could be temporarily postponed through technological innovations and/or political changes, an orderly and conscious degrowth would be desirable because it would minimize the costs of transition: once entering upon an unsustainable path, the only alternative to organized, voluntary, immediate and less costly degrowth is a chaotic degrowth, imposed by nature, further down the road but much more costly.

The way to approach the idea of degrowth varies based on our evaluation of how close current levels of population and economic activity are to unsustainability. If it is understood that demographic and economic expansion have already passed their limits, we have already reached unsustainability, and degrowth is not an option that we can choose to follow based on our moral or political preferences, but rather a necessary and unavoidable path. If we believe that demographic and economic expansion is still possible but will not contribute to increasing well-being or a better life, then degrowth can be a moral and political option: “living better with less” (Sempere, 2009). If we understand that demographic and economic expansion has still not led to an overshoot condition but is dangerously close to doing so, then degrowth can be a preventative option, a precautionary measure. The three approaches are present in the reappearance of the ideas of degrowth in recent years. Regarding the first understanding, degrowth is not an option but is something inevitable; for the other two, it is an option that should be chosen because it is desirable and/or fair.

The first of these approaches is the version that is closest to my personal perspective and was developed in collaboration with others in the ecological sociology working group

that I am a part of<sup>1</sup> (Martinez-Iglesias and Garcia, 2009). Not only does this approach seem to have a solid base in reality, but it is largely the basis or foundation of the other two: One of the fundamental reasons that economic growth no longer contributes to well-being [as estimated, for example, by the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare or by an alternate version of the former, the Genuine Progress Indicator (Daly and Cobb, 1989; Cobb *et al*, 1999)] is its excessive environmental costs (very high environmental costs are a sign of unsustainability); precaution always necessitates an evaluation of the level of threats and the complex totality of circumstances relative to their “factual density”.

The idea that a period of degrowth is inevitable has gained visibility and credibility in recent years because of the increasing, concrete and consistent indicators revealing that we are already living beyond the limits of the planet or are very close to reaching them – that we have already entered into a phase of overshooting or that doing so is imminent. For some time now we have heard warnings about the future danger resulting from our destruction of the Earth’s environment. Over the past four decades we have continually postponed the moment when we will finally take this danger seriously, but it now seems that this moment *has arrived*.

Those who hold this opinion usually refer to information such as the following:

- A review of the Club of Rome report on the limits of growth 30 years later has highlighted that the assessment made at the beginning of the 1970s (that the continuation of the trends dominant at that time would result in a situation of overshooting around the second decade of the 21st century) has now come to pass, even sooner than was foreseen (Meadows *et al*, 2004).

- Calculations of our global ecological footprint indicate that our use of natural resources already exceeded the regenerative capacity of the biosphere in 1985. Since then we have continued consuming these resources nonstop, reaching in 2007 a level of consumption 50% higher than what would be considered sustainable (WWF 2010).

- Reaching or having reached “peak oil”: with the rate of oil consumption being much greater than the rate of discovery of new oil deposits, we may be approaching that critical moment of the beginning of an irreversible decline in production (Deffeyes, 2001; Campbell, 2003). Campbell, a prominent analyst of peak oil based on Hubbert’s curve, recently estimated that the peak for conventional oil was reached in 2005 and that the corresponding peak for all types of oil was probably reached in 2008 (Campbell, 2009). In addition, at present there are no energy alternatives capable of maintaining the current forms and dimensions of industrial society (and even less so given its historical trend toward expansion), and there is no guarantee that such alternatives will be discovered or that, if they are, they will be developed in time.

- The possibility that global warming has now passed an irreversible threshold and that non-linear climate change is inevitable (Gras, 2007; Pearce, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> This group has recently completed, with the support of the Spanish program for R&D (CSO2008-00291), a research project with the focus on the relationship between expert knowledge, citizen participation and sustainability in socio-ecological conflicts, involving a multinational team from 6 universities from Ecuador, France and Spain. Its main current project, *Transitions Towards a Post-Carbon Society: Redistributive Impacts and Everyday Life in a Context of Non-Fossil Energies and Climate Change* (CSO2011-24275), is part of the same program and deals with lines of social change beyond the limits to growth.

- The fact that we now face grave challenges producing enough food and supplying fresh water for the Earth's growing population (Smil, 2003; Pimentel y Pimentel, 2008).
- The enormous risk associated with out of control nuclear proliferation and with specific developments in genetic engineering and nanotechnology, the long term effects of the synthetic chemical soup that all organisms are exposed to.

All the factors we have just mentioned cannot simply be added together, as is sometimes done; not all of them are related: for example, the worst case scenarios for climate change assume a consumption of fossil fuels at a higher level than peak oil suggests. But, in any case, the information we have from different sources is increasingly clear and consistent. Ultimately, the degrowth perspective argues – based on the best available data regarding the disappearance of resources and the state of the Earth's ecosystems and their capacity to recover from past errors (Garcia, 2007) – that we have already entered into a necessarily transitory overshooting of resources (or that such a state is so imminent that many of its effects are already unavoidable).

Theoretically, the degrowth approach is based on the bioeconomics of Georgescu-Roegen (1971) and the philosophy of Ivan Illich (2004), also incorporating elements from the historical and anthropological critique of development (Rist, 1997; Shiva, 1989), doctrines of post-development (Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997) and other sources. *The approach is characterized, on the one hand, by the insistence that a situation of overshooting is unsustainable and therefore transitory and, on the other hand, by the understanding that we therefore have to look for answers to social and political problems outside of the development paradigm.* This dual position has led to an open, persistent and sharp criticism of the idea of sustainable development, considering it to be theoretically contradictory and inconsistent [Georgescu-Roegen compared it to a lullaby with strong sedative effects (1993)] and, in practical terms, merely an attempt to inject credibility into the old and always deferred promise of economic development: see, for example, the "bestiary" of sustainable development, a permanent section in the French magazine *La décroissance*.

### **From reflections on alternative development and post-development to the idea of living well**

Degrowth's critique of development is mainly based on the ecological crisis. Other critiques of development have focused more on inequality. In my opinion, living well can be understood as a reformulation and updating of these latter perspectives. Before indicating the reasons for this, I will review their essential aspects.

The approaches that I am referring more or less share the following analysis: To participate in the development process is to occupy a competitive niche in global markets. Those who cannot do so become objects of "cooperation for development" or recipients of "humanitarian aid" or simply die of hunger (or perhaps all three things successively, depending on how the geopolitical or global mass media winds are blowing). Exclusion exists on different scales and levels of intensity in different societies, but occurs everywhere. As might be expected given such a panorama, the world is full of multiple experiments in which victims of development are trying to escape this destiny by independently pursuing their own projects for improving their lives. Many of these experiments have had some success (Lappe, 2006); if not, the dimensions of the holocaust associated with exclusion would be even greater than it is. Many are expressed in terms of social conflict and follow a logic of resistance.



The proposals and initiatives that have emerged from this multifaceted resistance are sometimes conceived of as alternatives *to* development and sometimes as alternative *paths* of development. At times they adopt the language of sustainable development; at times they reject such language. These discourses frequently focus on relocalization (Mander and Goldsmith, 1996), post-development (Sachs and Esteva, 1996; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997) or cultural diversity (Escobar, 1994). The debates in this context are quite interesting, as are the significant differences between the various interpretations (Toledo, 1992; 1996; Esteva, 1994; Escobar, 2000; Barkin, 2002). Here I want to point out certain common characteristics that almost all of these proposals and initiatives have. First, emphasis is placed on the local-regional level as the most appropriate to express resistance to development-globalization and to promote alternatives. Secondly, there is a common insistence on autonomy, both in relation to the market and the state (based either on associations or communities). Finally, they emphasize cultural diversity (as source of knowledge based on experience and “adapted to the particular case”, as the basis for rejecting any model that claims to be universally applicable and as a source that offers a plurality of spaces for a multitude of initiatives and experiments).

These proposals for alternatives to development are often associated with sustainability: to be viable, these alternative social experiences are almost always dependent on access to local natural resources and to their prudent use. While “global” development consumes the Earth’s resources on a large scale and causes harm everywhere (and rapidly), local alternatives tend to act on a more modest scale on local natural systems, and there also tends to be a concrete interest in not doing irremediable damage to them.

In the majority of its current versions, the concept of living well has the characteristics just mentioned. In what follows we will look at certain aspects of living well, illustrated through quotations from a document that has been important in the process of constructing the discourse around this concept (see Huanacuni Mamani, 2010).

One starting point is the acceptance of *the failure of the promise of development*; understanding the current crisis as the “product of a model which is developmentalist, individualistic, predatory, purely materialistic, anthropocentric, etc.” and as “a crisis of life and paradigmatic” (p. 68). The failure of the developmentalist model is not due to its inadequate application, but to its inherent contradictions and its unavoidable tendency to generate and increase inequalities: “Clearly, under the logic of the West, humanity is mired in *having a better life* [an expression representing the primary aspiration of the culture of development]. This way of life involves earning more money, having more power, more fame... than the other. *Having a better life* implies unlimited progress, unconscious consumption; it leads to material accumulation and competition.... The existence of a winner implies the existence of many losers. This means that for one to be happy, many must be sad” (p.32). Finally, the system is doomed to imbalance, to destabilizing conflict, and to an inability to make good on its promises: “Instead of achieving ‘a better quality of life’, which was the promise of modernity, humanity advances every day toward greater unhappiness, loneliness, discrimination, illness and hunger.... And, beyond that, toward the destruction of Mother Earth” (p.6). *Living well*, then, is an alternative to development, but it is a more elaborate version, more far-reaching geographically and politically, than most earlier alternatives: “From the perspective of living well, we, the original indigenous peoples, are questioning the term development and all that it implies; as for our peoples, development has meant the destruction of nature and our communities. The term development is tied to exploitation, marginalization, depredation and dependency; as in the logic of the West, development involves winning at the expense of the other” (p.36).

Living well places clear *emphasis on the local-regional*, understanding that this is the best level to both express resistance to development-globalization and to concretize alternatives. Its geographic references range from local communities to the Andean region as a whole, in other words, both below and beyond the level of states. Its frame of reference is a constellation of cultural nations, different but with common basic elements, each one with territorial boundaries that are not the same as those of the existing political structures, which are perceived to be a legacy and continuation of the colonial past. Regarding cultural identity, living well refers to three levels: the local, the Andean and the American (from Abya Yala). On the level of daily practices, criteria such as complementarity and mutual support, reciprocity and rotating responsibilities, redistribution and ceremony (pp. 38-39) refer directly to the local sphere.

Living well is presented as a project which is separate from the market and the state. This separation is expressed in very general terms, as neither capitalist nor communist but instead as a type of communitarian socialism. But it is expressed above all in concrete economic options, arguing that “modern” commercial relations destroy traditional systems of exchange or denouncing the market economy for having “created ‘the poor’ when before there were communities of human beings with dignity” (p. 17). The critique of the market is explicit and insistent, attributing to it a capitalist logic, an “inherent individualism, the monetarization of life in all its spheres, the alienation of human beings from nature and a vision of nature as a resource to be exploited, as something without life” (p.32). Thus, the presence of the market is visible, though subject to many objections. Noteworthy, in contrast, is the lack of references to the intervention of the public sector in the economy: it is as if the state has disappeared from view without anyone finding too much to miss and as if the only relevant issue is its conversion into a multinational state that is finally respectful toward the indigenous peoples that have been excluded. The alternative to the market and the state is the community: “living well is inconceivable without community” (p.32) and “is a communal, harmonious and self-sufficient life” (p.21).

The concept of living well is integrated into a specific *cultural identity*, with different expressions but with a unifying core: “There are many nations and cultures in the Abya Yala, each of them with their own identity, but with a common essence: the community paradigm based on a life in harmony and balance with the environment” (p.15). The solutions to the problems of the present from this perspective are not only economic but also cultural, requiring a “return to origins”, to “the natural identity that expresses the values of harmony and balance in community” (p.68). The political projection of this reaffirmation of identity is multinationalism.

As with other movements of community and identity [and with certain variants of environmentalism], living well has some scores to settle with representative democracy and also – in my opinion – a bit of skepticism toward the illusions raised by direct or “participatory” democracy. This can be seen in the document that I am quoting from, where harmony, balance, complementarity and consensus are presented as values related to living well, while dignity, justice, freedom and democracy are related to “having a better life”, in other words, with capitalist development (p.22). It is not that the tension between community and freedom is specifically something new, but the “lack of tension regarding this tension”, if we can put it that way, does not seem to me to be something positive.

Living well claims to be *sustainable*: “Being in permanent harmony with everything leads us to not consume more than the ecosystem can support, to avoid the production of waste that we cannot safely absorb.... And leads us to reuse and recycle everything we have



used” (p.33). In some way, it seems to suggest that adopting the criteria of living well would almost spontaneously make human society compatible with the environment.

This has been a brief summary of the concept of living well. I chose as reference for this summary a text which has a certain affinity with many of the criteria and concerns of the degrowth approach. There are other presentations of living well which do not place as much emphasis on the ecological crisis. However, given that the objective of this text is to participate in a dialogue between the two approaches, I believe that focusing on this similarity can facilitate this. In any case, I have tried to provide an impartial and honest summary in order for the critical observations that follow to be understood as they are meant to be: as an expression of the problems and dilemmas that, in my opinion, merit analysis and discussion, and not as a dismissal of even those points that I do not share.

### **Living well and the variants of degrowth: pessimism, optimism and interpretations**

Does it follow from what has been written so far that there is a similarity or basic compatibility between living well and degrowth? There are, no doubt, certain similar elements, as well as an occasionally matching rhetoric: “The planet’s hegemonic ‘pro-civilizational’, developmentalist and modernist models of the last centuries are reaching, if they have not already reached, a limit, and are therefore now in decline” (Huanacuni Mamani, 2012:16). It is clear that living well, at least based on the reading that I make of it here, has several features of a “culture of sufficiency” (Garcia, 2004: 320-326). It has something in common, from this perspective, with political-moral variants of European environmentalism that propose “living better with less” (Sempere, 2009). I think, however, that it would be wise not to rush to judgment, leaving the answer to await the results of a more detailed analysis and a dialogue which addresses all their important nuances. Living well is an approach which emerged from an important sector of the new left in South America, of which it can be said, and with good reason, as has Gudynas (2010b), that it is no more sensitive to the limits of our planet than other past or present left-wing approaches and that it might even end up settling on an environmentally disastrous neo-extractivism. If the interpretations of living well that I have highlighted here mature and gain in social influence, they could provide a justification for neo-productivist tendencies (Gudynas, 2010a), but only time will tell if that is the case. Degrowth is also an idea in construction, with multiple forms that are not always compatible with each other, and not all of them equally close to the ideas of living well. I will continue with my argument, raising this question with regard to the different visions of degrowth.

Of all the questions that arise, once we assume the necessity of a process of degrowth in order to reach a more or less stable state of environmental sustainability, the most significant one is surely, when does this process culminate and end? How far will the decline take us? How far must degrowth go? To levels of population and consumption that are more modest and parsimonious than today but within the parameters of industrial society? Or back to the Stone Age?

Clearly, there is no scientific answer to this question. The future state of a system as complex as a society is not predictable. It depends on non-linear forms of interactions between multiple systemic states and multiple collective decisions of social actors. Even the very process of degrowth in its most general form is a hypothesis based on empirical claims that could be refuted (or temporarily modified under the effects of new technologies or policies). The dynamic is radically indeterministic, inserted into the uncertainties of history. However, even without a clear answer, the moral and political weight of the different

positions is great. In fact, in the debate, two very visible basic divisions on the meaning of degrowth are taking shape: *degrowth as the road to extinction* and *degrowth as transition toward a more humane society*. As stated in a formula that has now come to be common: crisis or opportunity? (Schneider *et al*, 2010).

The conviction that the rising historical cycle of fossil fuel use is coming to a close, combined with justifiable skepticism regarding its replacement with sufficiently cheap and abundant alternative energies, is the basis for forecasts that a collapse of the Earth's human population will not be postponed for long. Some versions also predict that this collapse will involve the end of civilization and not only its passage to a reduced sustainable scale, because the survivors, if there are any, will not be able to maintain the complex association of cultural characteristics that characterize present day societies (Price, 1995). The populations of post-collapse societies will have to live simpler lives, as did the hunters and subsistence farmers of the past. Often, another line of concretely biological determinism is added on this point: for example, the thesis that evolution propels any population of organisms toward multiplying without limits until exhausting the resources that have permitted that multiplication (Morrison, 1999). Some versions argue that the convergence of both determinations – that resulting from the decline in fossil fuels, which will impose a drastic reduction on the population and the complexity of societies, and that resulting from the pressures of natural selection in a context of scarcity, which will result in a difficult conflict and struggle for survival – means that degrowth will take a catastrophic and uncontrollable form, continuing until we approach extinction (Hanson, 2007) and return to the Olduvai Gorge (Duncan, 2001; 2006).

The postulate of human freedom, of the construction of the curse of history through conscious collective decision-making, is the basis for perspectives that, in contrast to those just mentioned, believe that degrowth will be an occasion to organize the adaptation of societies to a sustainable scale. Thus, peak oil will be the starting point of a prolonged crisis, characterized by chronic and widespread economic contraction, but also an opportunity for a change in direction toward the smaller, the slower and the more local, as well as a transition from competition to cooperation and from unlimited growth to self-limited growth (Odum and Odum, 2001; Colectivo Revista Silence, 2006; Latouche, 2006; Heinberg, 2004; Kunstler, 2005). An opportunity, however, is not the same as a sure thing. Those who state that degrowth could open paths toward a desirable reorganization of our social existence tend to add that this is no more than one of its possible trajectories (and that it is even likely that a series of poorly made decisions will lead to a process of permanent economic regression and growing social conflict).

In this spectrum of possible interpretations, the relatively most optimistic or voluntarist, those that see degrowth as an opportunity for change for the better, have taken root primarily in Southern Europe, in France, Italy and Spain, particularly under the intellectual influence of the *Institut d'Études Économiques et Sociales pour la Décroissance Soutenable* (<http://www.decroissance.org>) and diverse publications more or less directly inspired by it (Clémentin and Cheynet, 2005; Ariès, 2005; Besson-Girard, 2005). These have become a kind of visible current of opinion with programs, campaigns and their own media (*La décroissance*, *Entropia*). They even include certain embryonic traits of a social movement (see the *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity*, Barcelona, 2010, [www.degrowth.eu](http://www.degrowth.eu)). It should be added that there are similar positions and groups in many countries around the world, although in many cases they do not refer to “degrowth”, but to terms such as “post-carbon”, “transition”, etc. In more ways than one, the most “sustainabilist” versions of living well

have a marked air of being in the same family as this constellation of approaches, or at least they do not seem to be essentially incompatible with them. At the other extreme, the “pessimistic” versions of degrowth lack, up to now, practical projections and manifestations, with the possible exception of their influence on certain “survivalist” groups.

The most important thing to note is that this is an open process, with multiple and varied expressions, and the end result remains to be seen. There is still a long way to go. The visions of social change in degrowth (in the era of the downward slide, beyond the Earth’s limits, in the post-carbon society or whatever we want to call it) are not important because of what they say about the future, who knows what that will be, but because they free our imagination and make it possible for us to think outside of the dogma of growth, beyond the moribund paradigm of development. They are more important for what they tell us about the problems of today than for what they teach us about tomorrow. Uncertainty is the key word in matters of prophecy. There are no laws determining social evolution (Juan, 2006). The future is not written. With this in mind we can draw some instructive lessons from an exploration of the “boundary conditions” of the many possible paths. Degrowth attempts to examine these paths and what follows are some comments regarding this.

### **Degrowth, premodernity and human nature**

Speculation on whether human beings are by nature good or bad has always formed a part of philosophical approaches to the social sciences. This issue has reemerged in the debate on the social dimensions of the ecological crisis. It would be interesting to follow the Rousseauian aspects in the more “optimistic” versions of degrowth, as well as the Hobbesian aspects of the more “pessimistic” versions.

Consider, for example, one variant with “Rousseauian aspects”, an approach which has recently attained a significant level of recognition: the idea that peoples previously defined as “primitive” or “premodern” by Eurocentric social science (based on the prejudices of colonialism) have actually had value systems that are less oriented toward the domination and transformation of nature, along with very specific forms of knowledge regarding their local ecosystems. In other words, these are cultures which are more respectful of the environment, cultures which are more sustainable. This issue is important in the degrowth paradigm because it suggests that a change toward the smaller, the slower and the more local would not be regressive or backward, but would be a step toward overcoming the deformations created by a “false modernization”: not a return to caves but the salvation of civilized life from excess, which is what really threatens it.

I suspect that the identification between “premodern” and “sustainable” that can be found today in many idealized descriptions of indigenous cultures is a mirror-image of Eurocentric prejudices. It would be much more realistic to recognize that the plurality of examples and experiences is almost endless.

The rational core of the belief in a “spontaneous ancestral environmentalism” lies, perhaps, in the fact that subsistence societies depend on access to local natural resources to reproduce and, therefore, have a concrete interest in using these resources prudently and not wastefully (in contrast to transnational corporations, which have no local ties of any type and can therefore exploit the resources of a specific place until they are exhausted and then shift their activities to another place where the resources have not yet been depleted). Although this is true, the interest in a prudent and parsimonious use of resources can be undermined by demographic pressures, competition (or lack of competition) with other groups, desire for

expansion or domination, environmental change, technological innovation, etc., and no culture offers secure and infallible protection against such conditions.

Expressing it in another manner: *no culture provides a guarantee of sustainability*; among other reasons because the cultural dimension is only one of the variables that must be taken into account. Bateson (1987: 468) went to the very heart of the matter when he wrote that a civilization that believes nature is there to be dominated and that also *has advanced technology* has the same chance of surviving as a snowball in hell. Cultural error and the illusion of superiority with respect to the rest of the world is not enough for the situation to become really serious; having the power to influence the environment is also necessary. Only with a science of good epistemological quality that makes the development of powerful technologies possible can we destroy so much and in so many places and so rapidly! Thus, the dilemma emerges less from the complicated duality between “Western science and anthropocentrism” and “local knowledge and ecocentrism”, and more from the radical ambiguity of science and technology in late modern society. It should be remembered that the first humans were already capable of killing off the large mammals of Europe with stone axes alone (Sale, 2006). The point is that this took them thousands of years; not like now, when we can cause even greater extinction with such efficiency and rapidity.

Possibly not all, but certainly many, cultures contain enough elements to construct a narrative based on an awareness of limits, self-sufficiency, moderation, repudiating excess,... a narrative consistent with sustainability as a value and with the need to adapt to a relative scarcity of resources. In Europe, for example, taking certain classic myths, elements of the philosophies of cynicism and Epicureanism and the teachings of Francis of Assisi, we could develop a coherent cultural packaging for a program of “benign degrowth”. This is not to say that these narratives have no real impact; on the contrary, all “societal discourses” include a value system. However, what I am saying is that beliefs do not explain or determine social practices and that any grand “constituting narrative” is flexible enough to live with different socio-economic practices and even, in certain material circumstances, become a tenuous means for legitimating them. This is true for “pro-environmental” value systems that seem to have become the majority in modernized societies and true for “ancestral” value systems that serve as a reference for the present day rhetoric of living well.

In short: if the awareness of the always problematic relationship between society and nature is lost, if one takes the position that culture itself is the privileged point of reference of sustainability, (and if one has – Bateson *dixit* – sufficient technical and material means), then there is nothing to be done.

### **Are there lessons to be learned from the past?**

Practically overnight, the concept of degrowth has awakened significant interest in environmental history and in processes of decline in past societies, and above all in a concept with which degrowth is closely related: collapse (Diamond, 2005; Costanza *et al*, 2007). The implicit hypothesis is that though past responses to severe environmental limitations may tell us very little about what the social reactions to severe environmental limitations of the present *will be*, they do tell us something about what they *could be*.

The processes of the rise and then fall of civilizations are classic themes of historical research, themes which in recent times have found a connection with the problematic of degrowth through studies of the collapse of past societies in which the overloading of natural systems played an important or determining role. On the one hand, we find general theories about the relationship between social cycles of expansion and contraction and general systems

theory, such as in the hypothesis of Tainter (1995; 1996), according to which collapse does not necessarily mean extinction or catastrophic decline into the chaotic disorganization of society, but rather, a transition to a human condition of less complexity. On the other hand, detailed reflections regarding conceptual aspects and cases studies on local historical episodes are also abundant (Gowdy, 2005; Orlove, 2005; Bunce *et al*, 2009). Debates on the relative influence of environmental degradation vs. other factors (internal conflicts, wars, invasions, etc.) have been revived in the cases of past civilizations that collapsed, as well as on whether comparisons between situations of the past and the present can be made and are really meaningful (McAnany and Yoffee, 2010).

Tainter argues that the collapse of a society leads to less economic activity and reduced trade, with smaller material and organizational structures, with less polarized social stratification, a smaller division of labor and less centralization. He synthesizes and describes all of this as a loss of complexity, as a drastic and sudden simplification. A collapse would then be *a rapid, drastic simplification*. This approach has a very instructive aspect: effectively, any process of collapse/degrowth has to generate decentralization, re-localization, de-acceleration, the greater weight of the community and greater decision-making capacity at the local level. However, that the sum total of all of this can be adequately described as simplification or reduction in complexity is another matter. The idea that social change follows a trajectory of growing complexity is too impregnated with positivist social evolutionism and owes too much to the stereotypes of modernization. The thesis that so-called “primitive” societies are simpler has been justifiably criticized for its ethnocentric bias. However, the substitution of the postulate of a linear progression toward growing complexity for a sequence of “accordion-like” cycles of alternating complexity and simplicity is also not completely free of such dependencies.

The idea could be maintained under certain conditions, for example, postulating a relationship between energy use and the scale and pace of social organization. In any case, in the absence of a precise definition of the polysemic term “complexity”, there are too many unknowns and poorly defined aspects for these very general and abstract outlines of the collapse of societies to be really useful. Thus, it seems that it would be better to leave the question of complexity aside, a notion that continues to be unclear, and focus on the more predictable characteristics of degrowth: decentralization, reduction of size, re-localization, community, etc. From a sociological perspective, all these issues have many sides; all have been the subject of conflicting and endless analyses. We will look at, to comment on one specific issue, the polarity between community and association. The idea that degrowth will bring with it the re-localization and, consequently, a relative strengthening of community, immediately raises the discussion about the pros and cons of this: greater solidarity but also greater control over the individual, greater opportunities for grassroots democracy but also for despotism, greater defense against alienation but a loss of space for diversity. The lesson to be learned from this is basically clear: we are far from being able to paint degrowth, like all historical processes, in only black or white.

In academic debates on degrowth, our future outlook is frequently compared with the most well-known precedent of collapse in European history: the fall of the Roman Empire. In this context, questions arise regarding the status of the enormous peasant base of the empire after the collapse of its political structure, questions which, despite their generally speculative character, are of interest today. There are no doubts about the decline of the great city of Rome, the reversals in urbanization, commerce and production of luxury goods, as well as the demographic stagnation: the notion of collapse seems almost obvious. However, for the people that populated the vast expanses of agricultural land at whose expense the splendor of

the civilization had been maintained, did the collapse lead to a better or worse life? I suspect that, despite there being an overall decline, the correct response is: it depends. It is possible that for communities that were richer in natural resources, with greater internal cohesion and political creativity, the withdrawal of the legions and tax collectors was a blessing; and on the contrary, it is possible that for communities settled on poorer and more divided lands and that were victims of more tyrannical lords, things would have worsened. The “natural” result of the crisis of a centralized structure is neither one of general improvement or general decline; instead it is one of diversification.

We will have to wait for additional historical research for a more complete answer to this question. Meanwhile, continuing with the analogy, questions arise over whether the collapse of the great “global cities” of the contemporary world will have beneficial or harmful effects on the half of humanity that lives in subsistence economies, outside of globalized markets and state mechanisms of social intervention. Some advocates for an alternative globalization, clearly moved by a desire for controversy, have already responded that the effects will surely be beneficial, easing the pressure on the world’s natural resources caused by the power centers of the globalized economy, and therefore making local resources more accessible to local populations. Khor (1996:57), for example, after commenting that a significant downsizing of the level of industrial technology is necessary to address the collapse of civilizations, says: “But it is almost impossible to hope that the developed world will do this voluntarily. It will have to be forced to do so, either by a new unity of the developing world in the spirit of OPEC in the 1970s and early 1980s or by the economic or physical collapse of the world economic system.” He suggests that such a collapse would have little effect on the half of the population that is today victim of globalization. In the same way that the collapse of Rome probably meant little for the broad peasant base of the empire, possibly even permitting an improvement in material conditions in some places, the collapse of modern capitalism, while disastrous for the inhabitants of Los Angeles or Frankfurt, would only slightly alter the lives of much of humanity (possibly making their lives less difficult).

The controversial effect of this imaginary exercise is interesting. In any case, the hypothetical situation that serves as its starting point is very far from having only one possible reading. The countryside as a refuge in times of crisis is an old formula, which has been turned to on many occasions throughout history. However, at present, as opportunely noted by the post-development approach (Latouche, 1991), a large part of the half of the world living outside of markets and state social protection networks lives in the major cities of the Third World. These *megapolises* are essentially monstrous products of development, and it is unclear how their inhabitants would be able to subsist outside of them. The idea of a massive return to the countryside would be extremely problematic given current population figures. But in the end, who knows....

The analogy with the Roman Empire is, in my opinion, particularly questionable: In relative terms, the depletion of our natural resource base must be much higher now, above all due to our dependency on fossil fuels and the limits in the supply of potable water and food for a population of more than seven billion. All this suggests that more relevant comparisons would be with civilizations from the past in which excessive pressure on ecosystems appears to have played a more important role: Mesopotamia, the Mayans and Rapa Nui.

In any case, we should not forget that humanity’s contemporary ecological crisis is not new. Many societies of the past had to face limits imposed by their natural resource base, with outcomes that were not always successful. What is new today is that a civilization on a worldwide scale is facing its ecological limits; and in addition, that the process of

overshooting of limits has been extremely rapid, taking place in only a matter of decades. In other words, the present-day ecological crisis is not new because it is an environmental crisis, but because it is a *crisis of globalization and acceleration*. This is the core of our anthropological and historical challenge.

## **The population issue**

How might successful post-development or degrowth solutions be applied to adequately maintain a population of 9 or 10 billion persons? And, if such solutions are not applicable to such a population: How can the transition to a significantly smaller population be relatively benign?

Questions such as these tend to be rejected outright. The concept of overpopulation seems to be a taboo subject. Among many advocates for an “optimistic” degrowth, even the mention of the word “overpopulation” is unacceptable and its users labeled neo-Malthusian. The documents on living well that I have read are also almost completely silent on this issue.

I will take on the role of a “degrowth Malthusian” in stating that it is not possible to avoid these questions, however uncomfortable they may be. Based on current figures, the ability to produce enough food and supply fresh water for the world’s population is reaching its limits (Smil, 2003; Pimentel and Pimentel, 2008). Given the demographic forecasts that international agencies have made for the middle of this century, an extreme situation seems to be unavoidable, even if we introduce the most optimistic and well-intentioned hypotheses regarding access to land, agricultural reform, the cooperative spread of the best technologies, the reasonable use of local knowledge and voluntary self-restraint in the diet of “modern” consumers. In short: in a world with nine billion inhabitants there will be around 0.16 hectares of cultivatable land per person. This implies serious problems, and we can expect no miracle solutions from either technological innovation or social justice. These problems would exist even in the unlikely case that we were able to maintain the enhanced carrying capacity of the land that has been made possible thanks to the use of fossil fuels since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I will formulate the issue in another way. Approaches that criticize modernization, such as degrowth and living well, should not assume that the *demographic transition* (the hypothesized transition from high birth and death rates to low birth and death rates) will avoid overpopulation, because the demographic transition is the population doctrine of the development paradigm itself. To critique development but accept the assumptions of the demographic transition is logically incoherent.

To put it in even another way: Visions of the future such as degrowth or living well imply a post-carbon society, based to a much greater extent than today on renewable energies and the use of smaller and less aggressive systems of technology (Gras, 2003) and inhabited by relatively moderate consumers. They imply a solar civilization, as were all civilizations up until the past century. This is a civilization which is not only possible, but also very likely, although in the end it may be imposed on us by nature and not by choice. The question of what will be a sustainable population for a world-wide solar civilization is not addressed by the scenarios examined by the demographic transition. No one really knows the answer to this question. Will it be two billion? Three billion? And then, how will this very particular demographic “transition” take place without trauma or enormous suffering? On a purely theoretical level there may be no great mystery: a couple of generations limited to having only one child would do the work with only relatively moderate costs, incomparably lower, in any case, than those we would have if we left the same outcome in the hands of hunger, illness



and war.

It goes without saying that this is much easier to say than do. But, in any case, this is a problem which cannot be solved if we remain silent. If we accept that population pressure on the natural environment is excessive, then we have to reduce the three factors which generate this pressure: population, consumption and the aggressivity of our technologies; all three of them, not just one or two. If degrowth, living well, or any other solution intends to be something more than an indirect criticism of capitalism, if they want to be proposals for a humanistic path toward sustainability, then they will have to leave biases behind and openly deal with all of the relevant issues, as this is obviously not going to be smooth sailing.

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