

Book Review

Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (eds.) (2015)

***Degrowth – A Vocabulary for a New Era.* New York: Routledge.**

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This collection of essays offers an in-depth analysis of the rising degrowth discourse – the project advocating the democratically-led shrinking of production and consumption with the aim of social justice and ecological sustainability. It achieves this by taking a broad look at the concepts and movements which are linked to, inspire and are inspired by degrowth. The book offers a challenge to the labour movement, as it urges discarding the idea that the pie needs to grow for them to get a larger share or, worse, just to keep their existing share. It challenges labour activists to think not only in terms of improvements to the material welfare of the working class but to bring to the bargaining table aspects of non-material well-being like self-fulfilment, joy and community. In this sense, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* is an inviting piece, politically and ideologically, which can bring together labour and environmental activists. It tells an appealing story, one that begins with the origin of capitalism and works its way up to imagine an economy and a society which is not ruled by gruelling workloads and deceitful images of consumption.

The book can be seen as a grand buffet for the degrowth discourse. It is a rather small, but beautiful, buffet. This is done on purpose, as the authors proclaim that “degrowth defies a single definition ... it expresses an aspiration which cannot be pinned to one sentence” (p. xxi). I will be using the term degrowth, although the authors in the piece often use the term *decroissance* – because it “sounds more inspiring in French!” (p. 15) (exclamation mark in the original). One could argue that this minor point is very symbolic of the degrowth discourse discussed in the book. The ideology of degrowth is not only the result of a moral decision to repair injustices, and is far away from any preconceived Marxist-like determinism. Sharing, simplicity, conviviality and care are powerful because they are not just political goals, but an inspired way of living one’s life.

The book consists of fifty-one mini-chapters, divided into four sections – “Lines of Thought”; “The Core”; “The Action”; “Alliances” – all of which are highly inter-referential. In some of the essays, it seems that authors have been asked to write a review of their term and its connection to degrowth, but either ignored the second part, left it to the readers to make their own deductions, or remembered too late that they were asked to link it to degrowth and added a very lean contextualisation. The different mini-chapters could be aligned into different themes which cross the initial four sections, and in this review I will touch upon several of these.

In the Foreword we are provided with an historical background, presenting the current crisis of capitalism as connected to “the post-war consumption-based economic model” and the “exclusion from it of individuals, countries, or even continents” (p. xxiv). This would be our first

theme – the historical and constant crisis of capitalism. This provides us with the fundamental conflict which lies at the heart of the degrowth discourse. It has been directed towards the over-developed part of the world, criticising the impacts of incessant growth on the minority that has enjoyed the fruits of growth at the expense of the majority of the world's population that has been and is still excluded from it. This is apparent in Chapter 8 – “Steady State Economics” – where it is actually stated that “poorer countries of the global south still need to grow to satisfy basic needs” (p. 52). Degrowth begins its birth only after basic needs are covered. It is the question of surplus which needs to be examined.

It is capitalism's surplus value which is the second major theme in the book. This theme is observed and often attacked heavily by different degrowth aspects, “an ensemble of institutions – private property, the corporation, wage labour and private credit and money at an interest rate – whose end dynamic is profit in the search of more profit” (p. 11). This is accumulation for the sake of accumulation, as the Marxist critique of capitalism echoes.

This leads us to the third theme of the book – whether degrowth is a revolutionary or a reformist ideology. Confronting the essence of capitalism raises the obvious question: is degrowth anti-capitalist? As the book offers different conceptualisations, so are there different answers. In Chapter 10, “Capitalism”, Andereucci and McDonough state that some degrowthers such as steady-state economist Philip Lawn claim that “capitalism and negative or no growth can be reconciled by devising institutions capable of countering the disruptive social effects of recession” (p. 61). This suggests a “different deal” instead of a “new deal”. If a welfare state that is a strange and unexpected hybrid of socialism and capitalism could be created, why can't we as a society demand a different capitalism, a finite one? What is really staggering about this chapter is its conviction that although most degrowth thinkers are aware of the incompatibility between capitalism and degrowth, some are “reluctant to explicitly position themselves against capitalism” (p. 62). Some do it because they do not want to put capitalism as the main essence of all and prefer to focus on “productivism and economism”, which are not necessarily exclusive to the capitalist mode of production. However, some are “primarily concerned with the acceptability of the degrowth project; such a willingness to engage, and seek the approval of economists and social scientists within the mainstream discourages the adoption of an explicitly anti-capitalist discourse” (p. 62). This remark is highly disturbing and should have been backed with more empirical evidence, since it implies that scholars are hiding their real intentions in fear of being marginalised. Are scholars being docile or hiding their agenda to reach a wider audience?

Revolutionary or not, the degrowth discourse offers a multi-layered criticism of capitalist culture, values, and economic and social effects. This relates to a fourth theme in the book, the moral aspect and the values of degrowth. In Chapter 11, “Care”, authors D'Alisa, Deriu and Demaria point out that “under capitalism ... there seems to be little time to dedicate to oneself, to family, friends or civil and political activities” (p. 64). They examine the ever-expanding market which wants to colonise every personal sphere. This is a very interesting look at the micro level, whereas on the macro level the market forces are seeking to turn basic public entities such as education and health into market functions. The authors could have linked this to the personal sphere, which they do look at; even there, care is outsourced with the use of babysitters and nannies (p. 64). In Chapter 12, “Commodification”, this is emphasised once again, looking at degrowth as the “critique of the colonizing expansion of market values, logic, and language into novel social and ecological domains”

(p. 68). In Chapter 14, “Commons”, degrowth is seen as a tool for emancipation from the “iron prison of capitalism” (p. 77).

Growth and capitalism are pretty much synonymous in the book, and are attacked vehemently. The degrowth discourse also provides a new framework, a political action which aspires to change the political order (even if it doesn't have one prescribed solution) but also to transform its members during the process. There is – or should be – a coherence between values and actions. For example, in Chapter 1, “Anti-utilitarianism”, the tyranny of egocentric individualism is questioned, “the claim that human subjects are governed by the logic of selfish calculation of pleasures and pains”, and instead what is advocated is “a variety of lifestyles ... pluralizing the possibilities of self-realization” (p. 22). Although talk about self-realisation raises the horrors of self-help books and life coaches, this is actually, to a great extent, the bread and butter of degrowth – not only changing the ownership of the means of production, but changing the hegemonic values of individuality and materialism. This critique of materialism is expressed in Chapter 9, “Autonomy”, where it is argued that “capitalism and consumer culture produce an acceptant populace ... (which) gradually involves the acceptance of patterns of behaviour and social meanings that underlie the materialism ... the more powerful a society is – in its facilities and its technological means – the more an individual feels powerless and experiences anxiety about his condition” (p. 56). Furthermore, “modern society threatens individual autonomy through addiction and dependence on goods and services” (p. 56). Instead, degrowthers offer a society based on conviviality and simplicity, as an alternative to the mandatory consumption reinforced by constant industrial growth. Marx and Buddha have never been so close.

Naturally, much of the criticism of growth and capitalism is conveyed through the environmental crisis and the prospect of depleting the planet's resources. This is the last major theme of the book – the environmental crisis and the impending catastrophe. It is one of the main pillars of the degrowth discourse. Degrowthers argue that there is no such thing as sustainable development. In Chapter 5, “Currents of Environmentalism”, author Martinez-Alier cries against shifting the whole world uniformly towards the American way of life, and argues simply that economic growth is not and cannot be environmentally sustainable. An alternative is suggested in Chapter 8, “Steady State Economics”, by a set of five rules: “renewable resource extraction cannot exceed regeneration rates, waste emissions cannot exceed waste absorption capacity, rate of consumption of non-renewable resources cannot exceed the rate of development of renewable substitutes, ecosystems cannot be threatened and human populations must be stable” (pp. 49–50). This clear strategy puts humanity in balance with the planet it populates without sacrificing the future for the benefit of a few in the present.

In conclusion, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for New Era* brings together a variety of paths for human society to break with the paradox of capitalist growth. Under the current capitalist order, we are faced with a vicious cycle – the tyranny of growth and surplus value leads to widespread misery and poverty, while initiating ecological destruction which brings more misery and poverty. With a blend of socialist, anti-materialist, feminist and ecological ideas, the book offers a possible way out and a much-needed breeze of optimism.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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