

Sources of degrowth extracted from GROWL degrowth common module - <https://co-munity.net/growl/degrowth>

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Degrowth combines its concerns.

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Ecology

It is about perceiving ecosystems as having value in themselves, and not only as providers of useful environmental resources or services. Secondly, it stresses the competition between, on one hand, ecosystems and, on the other hand, industrial production and consumption systems. An absolute decoupling between industrial expansion and ecological destruction has not been observed yet and it is very unlikely to take place: ecosystem destruction does not reduce with industrial expansion. Degrowth is therefore a possible path to preserve ecosystems by the degrowth of human pressure over ecosystems and nature, and a challenge to the idea that decoupling of ecological impacts from economic growth is possible. Degrowth leads to the *res communis* approach, or "commons" suggesting that environmental goods are commonly cared for to be shared or kept idle, so that appropriation by a single individual is avoided (local commons) or by a single group (global commons). This is to be distinguished from the problematic *res nullius* approach where resources belong to no one and can be freely destroyed and stolen. Strategy-wise, *res-communis* implies an integration of humans in nature, while "rights of nature" could be a rearguard strategy to preserve what remains, creating areas for ecosystems regeneration.

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Bioeconomics

Ecological economics and industrial ecology are also degrowth sources. This school of thought stresses the importance of resources and sinks availability and preservation (Georgescu-Roegen) and the need for a factor X reduction of resource exploitation. A classical reference here is the *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972, 2004).

For Georgescu, human activity transforms energy and materials of low entropy or good quality into waste and pollution which are unusable and have high-entropy. Even the inflow of low-entropy solar energy is limited in the sense that it falls in a dispersed fashion on the earth. Degrowth can thus slow down the process of material degradation. A steady-state economy (as proposed by Herman Daly) is not enough for rich countries.

The bioeconomic arguments for degrowth, including the decreasing EROI and the imminent peak oil, are often cited in academic and political debate. Hubbert's theory of peak oil states that there is a maximum level of oil resource extraction after which production begins to fall, and both energy costs and prices increase. Ecological economists have long appealed to the 1920s economic writings of Frederick Soddy (Soddy 1926; Daly 1980, Martinez-Alier 1987). The financial crisis of 2008 and the idea of "debtocracy" have revived interest in this author, who stressed that the financial system confuses expansion of credit with the creation of real wealth, while the real economy of energy and materials cannot grow at the interest rate necessary to pay off debts. As Georgescu and Odum explain, the available natural resources are actually decreasing. The increase of private or public debts is thus a perfect recipe for economic and fiscal crises.

Degrowth is a criticism to the belief in ecological modernization which claims that new technologies and efficiency improvements are key solutions to the ecological crisis. While technological innovation is a source of debate in degrowth, all degrowth actors question the capacity of technological innovation to overcome biophysical limits and sustain infinite economic growth. The Jevons paradox provides an explanation: eco-efficiency may lead to increased consumption or production because technologies suppress limits (to production and consumption)(Polimeni et al. 2008, Schneider 2008). For example, savings in energy and materials may be reinvested in new material and energy acquisitions, offsetting the gains in reduction of material and energy use associated with efficiency measures. Degrowth dwells on many 'non-technical' proposals for reducing material and energy flows outside the modernization approach which tends to discard the option of setting some limits to technologies.

However thinking on ecosystems and resources alone, and indicators to which they are related (like HANPP or MIPS), could lead us to a purely utilitarian version, and be loaded with western hegemonic visions.

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Critiques of development and praise for anti-utilitarianism

This degrowth source derives from anthropology. Authors within this current perceive degrowth as a "missile word", which strikes down the hegemonic imaginary of both development and utilitarianism. Latouche has been an important author in this stream of thought. Critics of development from the 1970s and 1980s include Arturo Escobar, Gilbert Rist, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Majid Rahnema, Wolfgang Sachs, Ashish Nandy, Shiv Visvanathan, Gustavo Esteva, François Partant, Bernard Charbonneau and Ivan Illich. Degrowth considers "sustainable development" an oxymoron and calls for disentangling from the social imaginary that it entails, and beyond this, it criticizes the notion of "development" itself. This is something in common with Latin American theorists of Buen Vivir, such as Acosta and Gudynas, as we shall see later.

The other face of this current in the degrowth movement is the critique of *homo-economicus*, against utility-maximization as the ultimate driving force of human behavior. This critique was inspired by Marcel Mauss in the 1920s (Mauss 1924), and Serge Latouche, Alain Caillé and other members of the MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales) (Caillé 1989). Other authors often quoted are social and economic historian Karl Polanyi (1944) and anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972).

The conception of human beings as economic agents driven by self-interest and utility maximization is one representation of the world, or one historic social construct which has been meticulously nested in the minds of many generations of economics students. Degrowth in that sense calls for more ample visions giving importance to economic relations based on gifts and reciprocity, where social relations and conviviality are central. Degrowth is thus a way to bring forward a new imaginary which implies a change of culture and a rediscovery of human identity which is disentangled from economic representations.

Critics of development and antiutilitarianism do not deal with inequalities, social closure, exclusions.

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Justice

For Paul Ariès (2005), an important type of degrowth is the degrowth of inequality. In line with Dobson (2003) degrowth does not take 'just sustainability' for granted. Instead it intentionally pursues and explores ways to make them compatible.

One common assumption among economists is that only economic growth can improve the living conditions of poor people on the planet. Given the perceived impossibility of voluntary income reduction and redistribution, the only strategy for dealing with poverty is having economic growth which will make sure that little drops of wealth eventually trickle down to the poor.

Facing the trickle down hypothesis (Snowdon 2006), degrowth opts for less competition, large scale redistribution, sharing and reduction of excessive incomes. If poverty is perceived in terms of relative consumption, it can never be "eradicated" by economic growth as it only changes the scale but not the proportions of wealth which individuals possess. Needs, however, can be served by multiple satisfiers (Max-Neef 2001). The degrowth popular literature, for example, has a large number of stories about "downshifters", or people who opt for frugality fulfilling their needs with satisfiers which differ from those used by people with high incomes (Conill et al, 2012; Carlsson 2008).

One approach is to deal with social comparison and envy. According to Le Monde journalist Herve Kempf, influenced by Veblen (1899), social comparison based on the existence and promotion of rich people lifestyles, has been responsible for social and environmental crises (Kempf, 2007). From a consequentialist point of view degrowth can make social comparison less problematic by reducing the reasons for envy and competition "*à la Darwin*". Setting a maximum income, or maximum wealth, to weaken envy as a motor of consumerism, and opening borders as enticing the conflicts between rich and poor nations, were some of the proposals discussed at the Second International Conference on degrowth.

The second vision implies repairing past injustice. A good illustration is the concept of ecological debt or the demand that the Global North pays for past and present colonial exploitation in the Global South. Another related movement is Climate Justice, driven by the increased social metabolism and the historical inequality in per capita carbon dioxide emissions. The struggles for climate justice (spontaneous movements and organizations with their networks and coalitions, such as Climate Justice Now!) could easily become allies of the degrowth movement together with many other movements for environmental justice in the South (Martinez-Alier 2010, 2012), including the post-extractivism and Buen Vivir movements in Latin America (Acosta and Martinez 2009; Gudynas 2011).

Thirdly, the equality approach to justice in the context of degrowth implies resource and wealth redistribution both within and between North and South economies. Justice here is understood as a concern

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for a fair distribution of economic, social and environmental goods and bads at all time-lines (i.e. intra-generational and inter-generational). Justice requires a degrowth of the living standards of the rich classes of the North and South. This point is often misunderstood by those who see population growth as the central issue. They seem to ignore the difference between the lifestyle of an artisan fisher in India and a banker in New York or Mumbai. It is opposed to Garrett Hardin's "lifeboat ethics", in which environmental and population concerns lead easily to racism. Degrowth of resource exploitation to secure basic access to ecosystem services in the Global South and poorer fringes everywhere is consensual among authors. Having said this, we should mention that equality is often misunderstood as universalism or as a call for uniformization of Western lifestyles (See Section VI).

Finally, some understand justice as preventing misery by establishing minimum standards and a basic income for all (in the form of natural resources, public services and/or money). Others challenge the basic income approach and underline the importance of merit and contribution to society (Garcia, 2012).

Degrowth through less technology e.g. in households would require more egalitarian division of labour between man and women. The competition "for having more" has been criticized by feminists. Class division is discussed in two ways within the degrowth literature: as a criticism to the level of labour division and as a proposal for max-min income ratio (Bayon et al. 2010). Reducing the conflicts generated by resources limitations could be prevented by degrowth. Also voluntary simplicity is related to non-violence.

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Democracy

This source for the degrowth movement springs from the calls for deeper democracy (Deriu, 2008; Cattaneo et al. 2012; Asara et al., 2013). In particular, degrowth is a response to the lack of democratic debates on economic development, growth, technological innovation and advancement. Within this source we find conflicting positions between those who defend present democratic institutions considering the risks of losing what we have achieved (a more reformist strand), and those who demand completely new institutions based on direct and participatory democracy (more alternative, or post-capitalist vision). Some of the key writers within this source for degrowth are Ivan Illich, Jacques Ellul, Cornelius Castoriadis. As Illich (1973) stated, past a given threshold, technology can no longer be controlled by people. For Illich, only when keeping the technological system below a given multidimensional threshold can we make democracy feasible. Ellul (1977), on the other hand, conducted profound studies on technology in which he described technology as a system that expands without democratic feedback and follows an independent path. In order to challenge techniques, which Ellul perceived as autonomous and self-augmenting, we need democratic feedback that is external to the technical system. Castoriadis is another key author for degrowth. He defended the ideas of "self-institutionalizing society" and of autonomy, meant as an entity that governs itself with its own laws. He defended that democracy can only exist by (and with) self-limitation (Castoriadis 1988).

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Meaning of life and well-being

The essence of this source is the emerging need for more meaning in life (and of life) in modern societies. It is a critique of life-styles based on the mantras of working more, earning more, selling more and buying more.

The "meaning of life" source of degrowth also draws on findings in the literature on the economics and happiness. The disconnect between income increase and life satisfaction over time, a phenomenon known as The Easterlin Paradox (Easterlin 1974), as well as the association between the importance of material gains and emotional disorders (Kasser 2002), are two important references.

The movement for voluntary simplicity, reducing individual consumption while seeing simple life as liberating and profound rather than restraining and limiting is an important vision within this source.

Reference works are *Walden or Life in the Woods* from Henry David Thoreau, the happy sobriety from Pierre Rabhi, voluntary simplicity by Mongeau, Schumacher's apology of enoughness and Kumarappa's *Economy of Permanence*. In India, the notion of aparigraha, sufficiency, self-restraint in consumption, is very much alive in some circles despite the economic boom.