

From “The Limits to Growth” to “Degrowth”: Discourses of Critique of Growth in the Crises of the 1970s and 2008

The presentation examines two discourses of growth critique that arose during the crisis of the Keynesian growth model in the 1970s and during the current economic crisis respectively. It analyzes in particular how these discourses deal with questions of labor, population and society in the context of the two crises. Compared are the debates surrounding the publication of *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1974) and several publications of authors committed to a ‘degrowth’ perspective which gained strength during the ongoing crisis. It is argued that these debates downplay sociologically relevant questions of labor, population and society, as dealt with by both critiques of growth. The paper notes a recent revival of Malthusian arguments and discusses specific suggestions offered by the proponents of both discourses through Foucault’s perspective of the ‘biopolitical management of population’. It is further discussed why these discourses of growth critique gain prominence in times of crisis and why they were more or less compatible with the transformations promoted during the different crises.

The two growth critiques are further seen in the context of a) “good governance”, which promotes a series of activation and responsabilisation processes not only at the level of social policy or security, but also at the ecological one, b) the emerging technologies each time (digital and computer technologies in the 1970s, green technologies nowadays) and c) the prospective developments, stakes and trends (global governance in the 1970s, New Green Deal nowadays), from which these critiques drew to cope with the impasses of their contemporary crises.

Finally, it is discussed how the two growth critiques prioritized the “universal” ecological limits vis-a-vis the crucial social question of each crisis, revived Malthusian perceptions on poverty and were more or less compatible with the transformations promoted in conditions of recession in the fields that were at stake in each crisis: the welfare state and a degree of labor regulation at the national level in the 1970s, and the challenges faced by working classes in view of international competitiveness norms and the remaining welfare rights after several decades of financial neoliberalization in today’s crisis.