

Attitudes towards technology: dominant technological optimism and challenges for the degrowth alternative

The way our society sees and relates itself to technology is crucial for the debate on economic degrowth. Serge Latouche, Francois Schneider and others have recognized this and propose, a highly critical if not pessimist attitude. A position which goes back to Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen but more importantly to Ivan Illich and those authors which describe technological systems as autonomous social systems; most prominently Jaques Ellul. This is a radical and indeed welcome deviation from the dominant paradigm of unquestioned technological optimism and technology as a measure of progress and development, which has traditionally been propagated by the economics discipline from early classical writers until today's neoclassical orthodoxy. The radical call for a selective moratoria on new technologies at the 2010 Barcelona degrowth conference, illustrates well this before mentioned deviation in the general degrowth community. However, in this paper we argue that in the absence of critical self-reflection, the community may easily find itself having replaced the dominant "techno-optimist" – dogma, with a "techno-pessimist dogma". This may firstly be premature, since there are many theoretical tensions and open questions, which have not even been raised yet. One of them is the "battle of systems" between energy and technology, which we briefly describe. Secondly, there are many other possible attitudes towards technology and stakeholders, including researchers, may have reasons for their specific attitudes. A critical self-reflection therefore requires the visualization, recognition and discussion of the full plurality of possible attitudes towards technology. To paraphrase Latouche, what is needed, for a sustainable future without economic growth, is a decolonization of our imaginaries about technology. In a previous publication (Ehlers and Kerschner 2010) we have introduced and empirically tested a framework which can be used for this process, by firstly exploring the current position(s) of the degrowth community to then intellectually engage with other others.

Literature:

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