What is Degrowth?
From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement

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ABSTRACT

Degrowth is the literal translation of 'décroissance', a French word meaning reduction. Launched by activists in 2001 as a challenge to growth, it became a *missile word* that sparks a contentious debate on the diagnosis and prognosis of our society. 'Degrowth' became an interpretative frame for a new (and old) social movement where numerous streams of critical ideas and political actions converge. It is an attempt to re-politicise debates about desired socio-environmental futures and an example of an activist-led science now consolidating into a concept in academic literature. This article discusses the definition, origins, evolution, practices and construction of degrowth. The main objective is to explain degrowth's multiple sources and strategies in order to improve its basic definition and avoid reductionist criticisms and misconceptions. To this end, the article presents degrowth's main intellectual sources as well as its diverse strategies (oppositional activism, building of alternatives and political proposals) and actors (practitioners, activists and scientists). Finally, the article argues that the movement's diversity does not detract from the existence of a common path.

KEYWORDS

Degrowth, social movements, activist-led science, political strategies, limits to growth, post-growth

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I. INTRODUCTION

Degrowth ('*décroissance*' in French) was launched in the beginning of the 21st century as a project of voluntary societal shrinking of production and consumption aimed at social and ecological sustainability. It quickly became a slogan against economic growth (Bernard et al., 2003) and developed into a social movement. The term in English has also entered academic journals (Fournier, 2008; Martinez-Alier et al., 2010; Victor, 2010; Schneider et al., 2011) and at least five Special Issues or Special Sections have been dedicated to the topic over the last four years (Kallis et al. 2010; Cattaneo et al 2012; Saed 2012; Sekulova et al 2013; Kallis et al. 2012). Degrowth has also been quoted and analysed by French and Italian politicians and many renowned newspapers,[1] including *Le Monde*,[2] *Le Monde Diplomatique*,[3] *El Pais*, the *Wall Street Journal*[4] and *Financial Times*.[5] During its short life, degrowth has been subjected to diverging and often reductionist interpretations. This article aims to improve the basic definition of degrowth while clarifying possible misconceptions regarding the term. To this end, we provide a short history of degrowth and a comprehensive description of its sources and strategies, meanwhile stressing its relevance as a social movement.

Unlike sustainable development, which is a concept based on false consensus (Hornborg 2009), degrowth does not aspire to be adopted as a common goal by the United Nations, the OECD or the European Commission. The idea of 'socially sustainable degrowth' (Schneider et al. 2010), or simply degrowth, was born as a proposal for radical change. The contemporary context of neo-liberal capitalism appears as a post-political condition, meaning a political formation that forecloses the political and prevents the politicisation of particular demands (Swyngedouw 2007). Within this context, degrowth is an attempt to re-politicise the debate on the much needed socio-ecological transformation, affirming dissidence with the current world representations and searching for alternative ones. Along these lines, degrowth is a critique of the current development hegemony (Rist 2008). The first critiques of the Western notion of development (universal uniform development) began with writers such as Arturo Escobar and Wolfgang Sachs, amongst a few others,

1. On a brief count, *Le Monde* published 18, *El Pais* 5 and *La Repubblica* 7 articles on the Degrowth movement in 2011.
2. Yves Cochet, a French politician and former minister, openly defends economic degrowth; meanwhile Sarkozy spoke publicly '*pour le nucléaire et contre la décroissance*' (in favour of nuclear energy and against degrowth) in April 2011 (*Le Monde*, 07/04/11).
3. Dupin, Eric (20/08/2009). La décroissance, une idée qui chemine sous la récession. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, pp 20-21.
4. Assadourian, Erik. (12/06/2012). How to Shrink the French Economy. *The Wall Street Journal*.
5. Caldwell, Christopher. (15/10/2011). Décroissance: how the French counter capitalism. *Financial Times*.

in the 1980s. Degrowth also challenges the ideas of 'green growth' or 'green economy' and the associated belief in economic growth as a desirable path in political agendas.

Degrowth confronts dominant paradigms in social sciences, such as neoclassical economics and also Keynesian economics, but is not a paradigm in the sense of 'universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of researchers' (Kuhn 1962: x). In economics, a new ecological macroeconomics without growth is emerging (Victor 2008; Jackson 2011), building on Herman Daly's 'steady state economy' (Kerschner 2010), which could evolve into a new paradigm in economics. However, there is still a long way to go.

Some people refer to degrowth as an ideology, meaning a 'system of ideas and values'. This position remains too simplistic, or at least premature, to explain its heterogeneity of sources and strategies. Degrowth is not just an economic concept. We shall show that it is a frame constituted by a large array of concerns, goals, strategies and actions. As a result degrowth has now become a confluence point where streams of critical ideas and political action converge.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section II addresses the relevance of social movement theory for degrowth; Section III briefly presents its history; Sections IV, V and VI present and discuss the different 'schools of thought' and strategies associated with degrowth; and Section VII concludes with an attempt to provide a comprehensive definition of what is meant by degrowth.

Primary information for this article was collected via 'participant observation', 'observing participation' (Cattaneo 2006; D'Alisa et al. 2010)[6] or by 'observant participators' (Brown 2007). The authors, in particular Francois Schneider, have been involved with the degrowth movement since its early days. In 2004, Schneider started a tour of France with a donkey for more than one year, spreading the proposal of degrowth. Many of the ideas presented in this article come from that tour and following public talks, which could be seen as an original way of doing field work and dissemination at the same time. More in general the involvement of authors ensures an insider point of view and access to a vast amount of informal knowledge and documents collected since 2000 and not always published in scientific journals.[7]

6. This method stresses the participative role of the observer and the fact that the resulting observations emerge from the reflective ability of the participant. In this vein, the motivation of the participant is activism and the academic outcome is a by-product of this activism.

7. The authors are presently members of the 'Research & Degrowth' which is an association dedicated to research, training, awareness raising and events organisation. Most notably R&D promotes the International Conferences on Degrowth (Paris 2008, Barcelona 2010, Montreal and Venice 2012). www.degrowth.org

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

Degrowth has evolved into an interpretative frame for a social movement, understood as the mechanism through which actors engage in a collective action (Della Porta and Diani 2006). For instance, anti-car and anti-advertising activists, cyclist and pedestrian rights campaigners, partisans of organic agriculture, critics of urban sprawl, and promoters of solar energy and local currencies have started seeing degrowth as an appropriate common representative frame for their world view.

Goffman (1974) studies social movements using the concept of frames. These enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label events they experience (Snow et al. 1986). Interpretative frames generalise a given problem or life experience and produce new definitions, demonstrating its links and relevance with wider processes, events and conditions of other social groups. The framing process is in fact one of politicisation, composed by two main dimensions: diagnostic and prognostic (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

The diagnosis mobilises multiple sources (or streams of thought) across space and time, and the prognosis engages multiple strategies and actors. These processes are described in detail below. The diagnosis consists of identifying the causes of a social problem. Degrowth as an interpretative frame diagnoses that disparate social phenomena such as the social and environmental crises are related to economic growth. Degrowth actors are thus 'signifying agents' engaged in the production of alternative and contentious meanings which differ from the ones defended by the mainstream (i.e. mass media, most politicians, economics professors and financial experts and industry CEOs). Pro-growth actors, for example, see economic growth as the best path to dealing with the current economic crisis and paying back debts, while degrowth actors find the economic system based on growth (fuelled by debt) as the core problem. Sources from which degrowth builds its diagnosis are presented in Section IV. It is the complementarity between different concerns that actually motivate degrowth.

The prognosis, usually characterised by a strong utopian dimension, seeks solutions and hypothesises new social patterns. Beyond practical goals, this process opens new spaces and prospects for action. Strategies associated with the prognosis tend to be multiple. In terms of approaches, these can be alternatives building, opposition and research,[8] and in relation to capitalism, they can be 'anti-capitalist', 'post-capitalist' and 'despite capitalism' (Chatterton and Pickerell 2010). We argue that these can be combined, as explained in Section V.

8. Anheier et al. 2001 refers to the existing approaches as rejectionist, alternative and reformist.

III. A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TERM[9]

Some of the ideas behind degrowth have been part of philosophical debates for centuries. The word '*Décroissance*' (French for degrowth) appeared possibly for the first time in 1972[10] as a description of a societal path, and was mentioned several times (Amar 1973; Gorz 1977; Georgescu-Roegen 1979) in the follow-up of the Meadows report to the Club of Rome, 'The limits to growth'. In 1982, a conference was organised in Montreal with the title *Les enjeux de la décroissance* (the challenges of degrowth), but the word was used as a synonym of economic recession (ACSALF, 1983). *Décroissance* became an activist slogan in France in 2001, Italy in 2004 (as '*Decrescita*') and Catalonia and Spain in 2006 (as '*Decreixement*' and '*Decrecimiento*').

Décroissance, as a social movement, only started in Lyon (France) in the wake of protests for car-free cities, meals in the streets, food cooperatives and anti-advertising (journal *Casseurs de pub*). This was followed, at the beginning of 2002, by a special issue of *Silence* magazine, edited by Vincent Cheynet and Bruno Clémentin. That same year the conference *Défaire le développement, refaire le monde* (Unmake development, remake the world) took place in Paris at UNESCO with 800 participants. In 2004, degrowth entered a larger public debate with the monthly degrowth magazine *La Décroissance, le journal de la joie de vivre*, selling today around 30,000 copies.

The English term 'degrowth' was 'officially' introduced at the first Degrowth conference in Paris in 2008, which also marked the birth of degrowth as an international research area.

Following the Paris, Barcelona, Montreal and Venice degrowth conferences between 2008 and 2012, the movement has further spread to groups and activities in Belgium, Switzerland, Finland, Poland, Greece, Germany, Portugal, Norway, Denmark, Czech Republic, Mexico, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Canada and elsewhere.[11]

IV. SOURCES OF DEGROWTH

Degrowth is rich in its meanings and does not embrace one single philosophical current. Its practitioners do not admire a single book or an author. Its thematic backbone derives from some streams of ecological and social thought.

9. A more general history of degrowth as a social movement can be found at http://degrowth.org/short-history

10. 'The global equilibrium, for which no-growth – or even degrowth - of material production is a necessary condition, is it compatible with the survival of the (capitalist) system?' M. Bosquet (André Gorz), *Nouvel Observateur*, Paris, 397, 19th June 1972, p. IV. Proceedings from a public debate organized in Paris by the *Club du Nouvel Observateur.*

11. More than fifty groups from many countries organised a Pic-Nic for Degrowth in 2010 and 2011.

The identification of degrowth streams was first developed by Flipo (2007). Following him we refer to the streams as degrowth 'sources'. Degrowth is placed at the junction of several such sources or streams of thought which cross each other without being in competition (Bayon et al. 2010). The sources bring methodologies and values together and constitute tracks for interpreting degrowth. Below we identify six sources (adding 'justice' to the five proposed by Fabrice Flipo). The attribution of authors to a specific source is somewhat artificial, as no author is related to only one. A more in-depth description of the first five degrowth sources can be found in Flipo (2007) and Bayon et al. (2010).

Ecology

Firstly, this source implies perceiving ecosystems as having value in themselves, and not only as providers of useful environmental resources or services. Secondly, it stresses the competition between ecosystems and the 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. Degrowth is therefore a possible path to preserve ecosystems by the reduction 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 (Bayon et al. 2010) suggesting that environmental goods are commonly cared for and shared so that appropriation by a single individual is avoided (as opposed to a *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.

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 (Sachs 1992), François Partant, Bernard Charbonneau and Ivan Illich. The essence of this source is the critique of the uniformisation of cultures due to the widespread adoption of particular technologies and consumption and production models experienced in the global North. As Latouche (2009) puts it, the western development model is a mental construct adopted by the rest of the world. Degrowth considers 'sustainable development' an oxymoron and calls

for disentangling from the social imaginary that it entails, and beyond this, it criticises the notion of 'development' itself.

The other face of this current in the degrowth movement is the critique of *homo economicus*, against utility-maximisation as the ultimate driving force of human behaviour. This critique was inspired by Marcel Mauss in the 1920s (Mauss 2007[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 maximisation 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 sharing, gifts and reciprocity, where social relations and conviviality are central. The focus here is on the change in the structure of values and the change in value-articulating institutions. 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 (Bayon et al. 2010).

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 of 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 here are *Walden or Life in the Woods* from Henry David Thoreau, *Happy Sobriety* by Pierre Rabhi, *Voluntary Simplicity* by Mongeau, Schumacher's apology for *enoughness* and Kumarappa's *Economy of Permanence*.[12]

Bioeconomics

Ecological economics and industrial ecology are also degrowth sources. Most ecological economists are followers of Georgescu-Roegen (1971) who

12. In India, the notion of *aparigraha*, sufficiency, self-restraint in consumption, is very much alive in some circles despite the economic boom.

introduced the term 'bioeconomics' and wrote in favour of *décroissance*.[13] This school of thought stresses the importance of resources and sinks availability (Bonaiuti, 2011; Odum, 2001) and a factor X reduction of natural resources consumption (Schmidt-Bleek and Klüting, 1993). 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 energy return on investment and the imminent peak oil,[14] are often cited in academic and political debate. 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 of the belief in ecological modernisation 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 modernisation approach which tends to discard the option of setting some limits to technologies.

13. In a fax to Paul Samuelson of 14 December 1992 where he complained about the silence about his work Georgescu-Roegen wrote ironically: 'I welcomed the opportunity to reveal how much of a doomsayer I was in the small volume with an outrageous title, *Demain la décroissance* (Paris, Pierre-Marcel Favre, 1979)'. See also Levallois, 2010.

14. 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.

Democracy

The next 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 and 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-institutionalising 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; Asara et al. 2013).

Justice

The last source we wish to mention is justice. For Paul Ariès (2005), the first 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 justice and sustainability 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 and wealth. 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 different satisfiers (Max-Neef and Kumar 1991). 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).

As described by Ikeme (2003) we can identify two groups of philosophical trends here, one related to the consequentialist approach which focuses on the ultimate results over the means, and the deontological one which favours the means over the results. As an illustration, focusing only on well-being or inequality indicators, is a consequence of applying only the first approach while giving priority to a behaviour such as non-violence, is related to the second one. Hereafter we go through different visions within the justice source of degrowth, while exploring the consequentialist-deontological duality.

The first vision is related to 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 ("no-border") to reduce means to keep inequality between rich and poor countries, were some of the proposals discussed at the Second International Conference on degrowth. From a deontological perspective degrowth implies a change of culture making us insensitive to the attractions of high-consumption lifestyles, as suggested by the anti-utilitarian school. 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.

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. The struggles for climate justice (such as the informal coalition of groups and organisations Climate Justice Now!) could easily become allies of degrowth, together with many other movements for environmental justice in the South (Martinez-Alier et al 2010, 2012), including post-extractivism and Buen Vivir in Latin America (Martinez-Alier 2010, 2012; 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 for a fair distribution of economic, social and environmental goods and bads at all time-lines (i.e. intra-generational and inter-generational). 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 uniformisation 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). Feminism,[15] caste and class division[16] and non-violence[17] are other key topics to discuss within the justice source of degrowth that would require extensive elaboration.

V. DEGROWTH STRATEGIES AND ACTORS

As discussed earlier, even if activists did not coin the term 'degrowth', they were the ones who promoted it as a slogan for voluntary and democratic societal change. Each source of degrowth can inspire a different range of action strategies at the local, global and inter-levels, relating to everyday life, but also to the abstract work of intellectuals. Action strategies vary from opposition, building alternatives (creation of new institutions) and reformism (actions within existing institutions to create conditions for societal transformation) – from local to global levels (for a similar analysis see Dobson 2007). Among the first promoters of degrowth we find grass-root activists engaged in opposition, and practitioners developing alternatives. Some actors call for a complete overhaul of the existing institutions, while others call for their transformation or partial conservation at both local and higher levels (involving political engagement and academic research). The combination of different actors under the degrowth umbrella has not gone without conflicts, nor without complementarity. We analyse some of these below.

Oppositional activism

Degrowth actors are often engaged in oppositional activism such as campaigners working to stop the expansion of highways, airports, high speed trains and other infrastructures. Opposition takes different forms: demonstrations, boycotts, civil disobedience, direct action and protest songs. A good example of degrowth opposition in the financial sector is the action taken by Catalan degrowth activist Enric Duran; in September 2008, Duran publicly announced

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

that he had 'robbed' nearly a half-million Euro by legally receiving relatively small loans from several banks, which he had no intention of returning (as he had spent them on worthy causes). This was a political action to denounce what he termed the 'predatory capitalist system'. One purpose of his act was to denounce the unsustainability of the banking system. Referring to the creation of money as debt, Duran declared that if the banks can create money from nothing, 'I'll make them disappear into nothingness'. From 2006 to 2008, he financed various anti-capitalist movements, including magazines printed in hundred-thousand copies focusing on the energy crisis (i.e. peak oil), on critiques of the debt-based economy, and on presenting concrete alternatives for a sustainable economy of solidarity.[18]

Building alternatives

Practitioners on the other hand promote local, decentralised, small scale and participatory alternatives such as cycling, reuse, vegetarianism or veganism, co-housing, agro-ecology, eco-villages, solidarity economy, consumer cooperatives, alternative (so called ethical) banks or credit cooperatives, decentralised renewable energy cooperatives. This is an illustration of the 'nowtopia' of Chris Carlsson (2008), or developing alternatives outside present institutions, now. The eco-villages and Transition Towns movement are important experiences within this strategy and often intersect with degrowth.[19] Some actors working on the development of alternatives argue that the change of individual values and behaviour should be the main target of degrowth. This is manifest in the lifestyles of people who practice voluntary simplicity, living better with less, downshifting and slowing down life's pace. Much attention is given to how conscious critical consumption can promote transformation at both the individual and the social level. The major idea being if less time is spent on formal work and consumption, more time can be dedicated to other activities which are fundamental to one's well-being, such as social relations, political participation, physical exercise, spirituality and contemplation. Such a shift will potentially be less environmentally harmful.

Italy's *Reti di Economia Solidale* (Solidarity Economy Networks) is a useful example. Born in 2002, they are an experiment to articulate and consolidate existing experiences through the creation of economic circuits, where the different projects sustain each other, exchanging and creating market spaces while

18. Publications available in different languages at http://www.17-s.info

19. It is argued (perhaps wrongly) that the Transition Town (TT) movement is an example of the post-political condition (Trapese Collective, 2008). TT mainly focuses on only one 'source' or stream of thought (peak oil and climate change) while avoiding the strategy of direct opposition. Therefore, it ends up proposing solutions without a previous analysis of what the problems are – their structural causes and responsibilities. This does not deny the impressive success of TT to mobilise communities, but it is brought here to stress the importance of the political dimension.

aiming at well-being and sustainability. There are already more than twenty *Distretti di Economia Solidale* (Solidarity Economy Districts) with hundreds of small enterprises working as business clusters under strong socio-ecological principles. In Spain, Enric Duran, Didac Costa and associates have developed the Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC). The CIC[20] is based on economic and political self-management with egalitarian participation of its members and attempts to include ways of satisfying all basic human needs, including the creation of a local currency (the 'ECOS').

Reformism: preserving and acting within some existing institutions

In the words of Latouche (2009) we are living not only in a growth economy, but in a growth society. Therefore degrowth implies a societal transformation. While many actors oppose or challenge some institutions, they often propose to act within existing ones. For example, while challenging capitalism via some actions, many radical organic farmers still organise their lives around cars and computers, which can be considered 'reformist'. In general, we can argue that some institutions need to be defended (like some form of social security and public health, public kindergarten and schools, or some other elements of the welfare state). The feminist literature, for example, highlights how 'green notions of self-reliance, sustainable communities and "doing one's bit" at home and in the public domain threaten to intensify women's already unsustainable burden of responsibility for care' (MacGregor 2004: 77–78). Reducing dependency on technology in households, for example, is another reason for having a more egalitarian division of labour between men and women.

Another recurring debate is on the type of democratic system. On the one hand we might have to defend the democratic institutions put at risk with the economic crisis, and at the same time support the development of more participative ones. Similarly, while some take a traditional anarchist perspective in favour of abandoning the state, others believe the state should be kept and improved.

In many cases, however, revolutionary positions could live together with reformist ones (or even reinforce each other). For example, proposals to set-up new institutions in a context of direct democracy which replace the current ones are compatible with the defence and reform of some of the existing ones. Establishing a basic citizens' income, the elimination of debt-based money (money not 100 per cent backed by deposits or real materials), and the protection and strengthening of the commons, can all be thought of as reform of the current institutions which go beyond the reforms that consolidate the current system.

20. One CIC activity already underway is Calafou (a new eco-industrial cooperative in a derelict industrial textile mill on the Anoia river), featured in the Degrowth conference in Montréal in May 2012 in the section tellingly called 'experiences'.

Research

All previous approaches require right understanding of the links between levels and sources, here academic and non-academic research have roles to play.

For Martinez-Alier et al. (2011) degrowth is actually an example of activist-led science. Activist knowledge refers to all kinds of experience-based notions originating from community groups, civil society, women's groups, trade unions, grassroots associations and so on. In sustainability studies, as in other disciplines, the knowledge gained from grassroots experience and activism has led to the creation of new concepts, like the ecological debt, climate debt, biopiracy, environmental justice, popular epidemiology or corporate accountability (Martinez Alier 2002; Simms 2005). These concepts are sometimes taken up, refined and redefined by academics. The reverse also happens, where academic concepts are taken up by civil society activism (Martinez-Alier et al., 2011).

Degrowth, launched by activists, entered the international English-speaking academic agenda around 2008. The literature is growing, with articles and special issues in various journals. As explained above, the International Conferences on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity[21] in Paris (2008), Barcelona (2010), Montreal and Venice (2012), have attracted hundreds of researchers from a wide range of countries. The Barcelona conference, for example, aimed at creating cooperative research by bringing together scientists, practitioners and activists. The event deviated from the standard model of academic conference organisation and used practical direct democracy techniques to discuss and develop policy proposals and research priorities in different areas.

The debate and research has just started. We need not only agreements within the movement on what it advocates, but also on how to implement the proposals. Much more research on what type of degrowth, and how much of it, is needed. Doubt is cast on whether the final outcome will still be a capitalist economy and society or not (Gorz 1972; Jackson 2011). Tim Jackson advises readers not to fight over words. Capitalist or not, we cannot afford (ecologically and socially) more economic growth in rich countries. This pragmatic approach, however, is not highly popular among degrowth partisans who see themselves as anti-capitalists.

Acting on different scales: local, national, global

The degrowth movement is also concerned with the appropriate scale of action. There is awareness that action must be taken on all levels. Most activities take place at the local scale, and are often articulated through informal and formal networks. *Transition towns* (UK)*, Rete del Nuovo Municipio* (Italy)

21. http://www.degrowth.org

and *Comuni Virtuosi*[22] (Italy) are good examples of urban-focus approaches. Degrowth networks and actions, however, also exist nationally and regionally.[23] An informal network is also consolidating at the international level around events like the Degrowth Conferences. The most consolidated networks are issue specific (i.e. agroecology), but being a frame, degrowth offers the potential to create a network of networks including activists, practitioners, researchers, politicians and scientists (i.e. *Redes en Red*[24]). There is an open debate over various possible ways of organising such a network.

Even though networking is at the centre of degrowth, the movement is still far from being able to coordinate actions to reduce absolute consumption of energy and materials at the national and global scale. What would happen to a nation that independently undertakes degrowth policies? Can degrowth alternatives be built in a social context of economic growth and 'debt-fuelled' capitalism? What should be done with the debts in a context of 'debtocracy'? Here the open questions also have to do with the appropriate political conditions that might support the implementation of certain policies. It remains unclear how the socio-ecological transformation might actually take place at macro scales and which institutions should be involved. For example, those proposing direct democracy based on assemblies or the project of Inclusive Democracy (Fotopoulos, 1997) never convincingly articulate how to go beyond the municipal level of organisation. Perhaps, following Murray Bookchin (1980), a confederation of municipal entities could take up the administrative roles of a state no longer focusing on economic growth. This is a view congenial to many in the degrowth movement.

VI. DISCUSSION

Degrowth sources

The previous review of degrowth sources has shown the diversity of arguments which can be employed to defend degrowth. Several points are discussed here. First, the classification of sources presented in this article for analytical purposes should not be seen as implying hermetic compartments. Instead, it highlights the different foci of attention embraced by different writers or actors, depending on their social, cultural or political backgrounds.

Second, the overview of streams of thought feeding into the river of the degrowth movement is not exhaustive. Feminism, political ecology, non-violence (including the critique of militarism), radical bottom up neo-Malthusianism

22. www.transitionnetwork.org, www.nuovomunicipio.org, www.comunivirtuosi.org

23. Some examples are: in Italy *Rete per la Decrescita*; in France *Réseau des Objecteurs de Croissance pour l'Après-Développement*; in Switzerland *Réseau Objection de Croissance;* in Brazil *Rede pelo Decrescimento Sustentável.*

24. Network of networks: redesenred.net

(Ronsin 1980; Martinez-Alier and Masjuan 2005), class divisions and open borders positions should be further elaborated. Particularly, further elaboration is needed on the gender dimensions of degrowth, as was done at the Venice conference of 2012. The first and strongest critiques of GDP accounting came from feminist economics, allied to ecological economics (Waring 1988). Feminist environmentalism (Agarwal 1992), for example, emphasised the gendered practical and cultural values of nature outside the market.

Third, some followers of Marx have argued that degrowth does not explicitly or sufficiently position itself against capitalism.[25] Yet, some orthodox Marxists embrace the idea that consumer goods (which are products of capitalism itself) should be widely and easily accessible remaining thus linked to productivism, where the objective is maximising production and growth (Altvater, 1993). Other interpretations of Marx on the contrary criticise unilinear progress, as did Walter Benjamin from the Frankfurt school (Postone, 2009; Jappe, 2003); also neo-marxists like David Harvey or eco-socialists like Joel Kovel and Michael Lowy, are more in line with degrowth. Other Marxists have also recently started to adopt the ideas of degrowth in their writings (Badiale and Bontempelli, 2010; Altvater, 2011). While eco-marxist J. B. Foster openly mocked degrowth (Foster, 2011), the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* has edited a special issue on degrowth in 2012.

Finally, the complexity and multi-dimensionality of degrowth can sometimes be difficult to communicate, and overwhelming to people looking for a single guide to practical action. Yet, overlooking one of these sources can be problematic. Jean-Claude Decourt, author of several documentaries on degrowth, says that growth would be problematic even if infinite natural resources were available.[26] Degrowth only makes sense when its sources are taken into account, meaning not just ecology and bioeconomics, but also meaning of life and well-being, anti-utilitarianism, justice and democracy. Taken independently they can lead to incomplete and reductionist projects fundamentally incompatible with the ideas of the degrowth movement. Being concerned with resource scarcity, or with ecosystem destruction, but not with world justice can lead to top-down anti-population proposals and anti-immigration discourse. Justice without democracy can lead to authoritarian solutions, as suggested perhaps by Wolfgang Harich's *Kommunismus ohne Wachstum* (Communism

25. Elmar Altvater recently declared in an interview: 'there is no way out of the dilemma between the capitalist imperative to accumulate and the limits that nature sets. In the long term, a reduction of growth is inevitable and, therefore, an economy of degrowth. However, I tend to doubt that such a thing could occur within the capitalist mode of production, since it also means de-accumulate. That is not clear in many of the representatives of the theory of degrowth.' Ferrero, Àngel (26/09/2012). 'Socialism of the XXI Century can only be plural', an interview with Elmar Altvater. La Directa 287 (translated from Catalan by the authors).

26. 'Quand bien même la Terre serait illimitée, nous serions contre la croissance, parce qu'elle détruit l'humain en nous, parce qu'elle détruit la beauté.' (Even when the earth will be unlimited, we will be against growth, because it destroys the human in ourselves, because it destroys beauty). utopimages.org

without growth) of the mid-1980s which carried the subtitle 'Babeuf and the Club of Rome'. Improving democracy or justice without worrying about meaning of life could lead us to techno-centred solutions. In this line, Carter (2004) shows the importance of combining concerns in order to create the right conditions for a radical green society. While not all actors may be able to get involved or work on the whole set of concerns without risking a burn out, understanding each other's concerns is feasible.

Degrowth strategies

The debates and controversies over strategies employed within each source of the degrowth movement have been most intense. Strategies of opposition can be perceived as conflicting with the practitioners promoting alternatives, or with the researchers bringing only a diagnosis (and sometimes a vague prognosis). In the world of politics, the strategy of opposition is the revolutionary stance which opposes the reformist position.

What we tried to illustrate previously, however, is the potential for compatibility among the strategies used by the movement as more and more actors realise the importance of combining strategies at the local and/or global level (Chatterton and Pickerell, 2010). The challenges faced by our societies are so wide that diversity is an indispensable source of richness – so long as participants are conscious of the limitations of their activities and humble enough to remain open to constructive criticism and improvements. Actually, these tensions among the strategies can be one of the forces by which to keep creativity and diversity alive, assuming communication channels remain open.

There is not only possible compatibility between the strategies, but combining the right strategies can also enable the right process of transformation. This can best be analysed and understood in a short-term versus long-term timescale perspective. The movement has an urgent pending task: to elaborate a transition (better called a transformation) path in rich societies from the actual crisis of economic growth to socially accepted degrowth. Under this perspective, strategies can be combined along a defined timescale to shape scenarios. People employing the opposition strategy challenge 'development' on the ground – stopping 'harmful' projects and generating fundamental public debates. Scientists and intellectuals who dedicate most of their efforts to the struggle of ideas, can open up new imaginaries and create links between levels and approaches. Practitioners experiment with new possibilities in everyday life at both individual and collective level. Degrowth activists, intellectuals and policy makers engaged at the larger scale can help to facilitate societal adjustment to the actions of local practitioners and activists (Schneider, 2010). The act of opposition will not be successful if conditions for societal change are not adequate. This is where some so-called 'reformists' have a role to play. We might have to call them *revolutionary reformists*. All actors together

challenge the hegemony, with barricades or words, while imaging and building alternative socio-environmental futures. For Latouche (2009) degrowth is not a concrete and universal alternative to growth, but a matrix of multiple alternatives that will reopen the space for human creativity, after removal of the plaster of economic totalitarianism. The eventual success story of degrowth in the media, academia and society could actually be related to the good variety of strategies within degrowth.

Degrowth actors

Who is the political subject of degrowth? This is an open question, which will determine the forms of conflict and the persistence of the movement over time (Romano 2012). Degrowth can be perceived as a new social movement where a new middle class (people with high education, often working in the service sector) plays an important role (Habermas 1981). New social movements engage in conflicts over the production of knowledge including symbolic production (Touraine 1981). Although degrowth challenges the social imaginary on issues like development, democracy and 'the good life' – where the individuals, communities or whole societies struggle for an autonomous definition of their self (Melucci 1996); it is not a mere non-material, or post-materialist movement, as it also addresses economic and political power dynamics (justice), and natural resource scarcity (bioeconomics). Degrowth can thus probably be better described as a combination of 'old' and 'new' social movements, engaging in 'old' and 'new' structural conflicts (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

Duverger (2011) describes well the French degrowth movement's conflicts among actors who adopt and defend a single strategy (although often wrongly interpreted as a conflict on sources). Also the Barcelona conference (2010), for example, was a meeting among scientists, activists and practitioners, which resulted in some differences and even frictions, but ultimately dialogue was established. What may have contributed to the establishment of a healthy dialogue among disparate actors is the unique characteristic that many of the participants were functioning in multiple roles: many activists involved were simultaneously working as researchers inside or outside academia, whilst many researchers were also engaged as activists inside or outside institutions. Furthermore, most people were, and are, practising the ideas of degrowth in their daily lives or in the institutions in which they are involved. The movement is struggling with the difficulties arising from working with diverse actors cohesively and playing the role of 'bridging actors' to catalyse collaboration and learning across levels. Present tensions and confrontations are attributed to the involvement of multiple actors with multiple identities, though, as Duverger (2011) pointed out, this can have positive effects as well. Certainly this characteristic of degrowth actors is in line with those who call into question the

binary construction of activists and non-activists (Askins, forthcoming), or the trends observed in England by Chatterton and Pickerill (2010).[27]

One main point here is that an explicit call for the combination of concerns goes nevertheless together with the exclusion of groups that develop reductionist interpretation of the critiques against growth, such as xenophobes, right-wing environmentalists (i.e. the *Nouvelle Droite* of Alain De Benoist in France), groups with a nihilist perspective (i.e. neo-primitivists like John Zerzan), anti-immigrant and racist organisations (e.g. the Carrying Capacity Network in the USA) or those who would support mainstream western lifestyles at the cost of a drastic reduction of population. They simply fail to combine degrowth sources.

VII. CONCLUSION

The present article represents an attempt to search for a 'better' definition of degrowth. Generally degrowth challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialised countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being. Although integrating bioeconomics and ecological macroeconomics (Victor, 2009; Jackson, 2011), degrowth is a noneconomic concept. On one side, degrowth is the reduction of energy and material throughput, needed in order to face the existing biophysical constraints (in terms of natural resources and ecosystem's assimilative capacity). On the other side, degrowth is an attempt to challenge the omnipresence of market-based relations in society and the growth-based roots of the social imaginary replacing them by the idea of frugal abundance.[28] It is also a call for deeper democracy, applied to issues which lie outside the mainstream democratic domain, like technology. Finally, degrowth implies an equitable redistribution of wealth within and across the Global North and South, as well as between present and future generations. Degrowth sees itself as an ally of the global environmental justice movement with strong roots in the South. It applauds initiatives such as the Yasuni ITT proposal in Ecuador and other similar attempts to 'leave oil in the soil, coal in the hole', South or North.

This article has presented, discussed and analysed the history of degrowth, showing that it first appeared as an activist slogan and soon became an interpretative frame of a social movement. We have illustrated the diversity that

27. See also: http://teamcolors.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/workshop-what-is-militant-research/

28. Frugal abundance is the term used by Latouche (2009). Understanding degrowth as a 'matrix of alternatives' we should also consider other proposals with similar connotations such as: 'conviviality' by Ivan Illich, 'prosperity without growth' by Tim Jackson, 'better with less' by Jose Manuel Naredo, 'buen vivir' by indigenous communities as recognised in the Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, and also 'eudaimonia' by Aristotle, human flourishing, *joie de vivre* and others.

can co-exist within a frame, not only for the prognosis (strategies), but also for the diagnosis (sources), a fact often neglected in social movement theory. Thus degrowth is neither a mere criticism of economic growth, nor a proposal for a decrease of GDP.[29] The attractiveness of degrowth emerges from its power to draw from and articulate different sources or streams of thought and to formulate strategies at different levels. It brings together a heterogeneous group of actors who focus on housing and urban planning, financial issues and alternative money systems, agroecology and food systems, international trade, climate justice, children's education and domestic work, meaningful employment and cooperatives, as well as transport and alternative energy systems. We have argued that degrowth could complement and reinforce these topic areas, functioning as a connecting thread (i.e. a platform for a network of networks)

Degrowth activists attempt to re-politicise the public debate by identifying and naming different socio-environmental futures (Swyngedouw, 2007). This happens in two ways. First, they articulate particular concerns, demands and means to achieve the desired socio-environmental arrangements ('theory is politics'). Second, they oppose power in its different forms, starting from its provocative denomination which challenges the consensus on growth in parliamentary politics, in business, in the bulk of the labour movement and in the social imaginary. Rather than accepting a fake consensus (such as the need to grow in order to pay the debts, or sustainable development, or climate change discourse *à la* Al Gore) where everyone is supposedly in the same boat, degrowth gives visibility to the contradictions and the conflicts at different scales.

Finally, degrowth is an example of an activist-led science, where an activist slogan is slowly consolidating into a concept that can be analysed and discussed in the academic arena. The sources from which degrowth draws, and the strategies and political proposals that degrowth puts forward, are often not new, but their combination is innovative and, in our view, coherent. We have argued in favour of their compatibility and complementarity for two reasons. First, they do not necessarily undermine each other's robustness but can rather be combined when taking a longer-term horizon. Second, the diversity maintains a sort of tension which stimulates constructive debates and exchanges, offering an incentive for continuous improvements both at the theoretical and practical levels. Therefore the differences and conflicts within should be recognised and valued as forces that keep the movement open and alive in its continuous evolution.

29. Considering the weak and arbitrary nature of GDP as an indicator (Van den Bergh, 2009; 2011), and following Latouche (2009), the irrelevance of GDP increases/decreases can be expressed with the term 'a-growth' in the same sense that one can be an a-theist.

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