

The form of degrowth

Summary

The ecological and social crises, standing at the origins of the political engagement for degrowth, are not the outcome of execrable “values” but mainly of the “horizontal” form adopted by growth regime. Horizontalism is founded on a clear separation between “functions” and “values”: the social pattern is not aimed to the implementation of specific values or ideas of justice. The regime is uninterested in any value and it only assures that each singularity (the citizen and its networks) could freely play its game on the basis of its own values. This indifference is the basic reason of ecological, social and economic deregulation. The paradox of degrowth is that, on the one hand, it evokes the necessity of a return to “vertical” regulation (i.e. collective sovereignty), on the other, it is deeply subaltern to the paradigm of horizontalism (the same that frames the growth regime).

Narrative step: facing the current crisis.

Keywords: horizontalism, verticalism, values vs. form, Europe, Mediterranean

The aim of this paper is twofold: “theoretical” the first and “political” the second. On the one hand, we will take the project for a degrowth society as a paradigmatic example of the “structural” inability of the current critical thought to counteract neoliberalism and to profit from its crisis; on the other hand we will try to build a new framework for the degrowth proposal.

The main thesis is that degrowth reveals ineffective (on the intellectual and political point of view), because, beyond the competition on “values”, it lies on the same “form” that frames the growth regime. A shift towards degrowth is unlikely if we do not rethink the “form” dimension of the project.

Horizontalism and verticalism

During modernity, we have witnessed a constant hegemonic alternation between a “horizontalist” paradigm and a “verticalist” paradigm, both in social theory and in social organization. The concepts are not thus defined by current sociological literature but, in order to avoid ambiguities and misunderstandings of a political nature, we think it is appropriate to deliberately use these neutral, stylized and geometric terms.

Here the paradigm is to be understood as a complex scheme that contains both a specific look at reality and a political and action model: the general form, the basic framework that orders our knowledge of reality, on the one side and, on the other, the organizational patterns of our collective existence.

For horizontality, immanence is the privileged dimension. To understand society we must first refer to individuals and their relational strategies. In general, it is believed that we can find the true meaning of a social organism by looking at its single players and the networks they interweave. The order doesn’t radiate from a central control room, but it is the *ex post* result of the interaction dynamics between social actors. The single parts may be independent of one another, or melt according to common principles, but in any case they do not respond to a central intentionality.

The analytical level is also linked to the political manifestation.¹ Here the dominant narrative sounds more or less like this: a social order is much more desirable insofar as it leaves out the subject “as is”, promoting a process of self-revelation. “Let it be” is the motto. Individuals must be what they prefer to be. The more social players are free to act and interact based upon their own preferences, the more society as a whole will be happy. The acephalous logic is seen as the most proper to understand social life and, consequently, to steer society.

Both on the analytical and normative level, the horizontal view is led to imagine the existence of a sort of basic region, alien to any institutional form, where “authenticity” lies. In Marxist terms (Marx, 1973), this region is an infrastructural domain, with respect to which everything must be considered as a derived superstructure. It imagines that the molecules and the singularities swarming in this grassroots dimension have an original character that needs to transpire and to emerge: any attempt to steer these molecules from outside is not only impracticable, but also abusive and immoral. There is a kind of spontaneity of social life that has to be left alone, to the free will of its parts. What is the original unit inside this dimension? It depends on the schools of thought and political options. For liberalism, the fundamental unit is made up of individuals. For other traditions, it is the micro-relational environment (i.e. the proximity-affective community) in which the “person” flourishes, as against social organization. If the identification of the individual as the original unit leads immediately to elect the market as the most proper institutional order, in the relational approach the motto is: “neither with the State nor with the market”. The golden dimension is the self-governing grassroots community that comes before individuals and well before public institutions and their ruling pretensions.

Horizontality appears to be the “natural” order, more harmonious and suited to individual moods. The verticalist idea replies that the horizontality regime does not lead to equilibrium and, anyway, the resulting order is unjust, not really chosen and not really desirable by social players.

We can hear an echo of horizontality in what Max Scheler (1960) critically calls “natural world view”: this is a recurrent idea cherished both in philosophy and, more generally, in the political and cultural domain, mechanically set against a “relatively artificial or learned world-view” (from myth to technological knowledge).

The core of horizontalism is also recognizable in that kind of utopian ingenuity that Mannheim ascribes to Landauer:

“Landauer [...] regards the existing order as one undifferentiated whole, and he, by according esteem only to revolution and utopia, sees in every topia (the present existing order) evil itself. Just as the representatives of an existing order did not differentiate between the varieties of utopia (enabling us to speak of a utopia-blindness) so the anarchist may be accused of blindness to the existing order” (Mannheim, 1991, pp. 177-178).

Theoretical horizontalism tends to recognize in the order as is –i.e. the order itself, regardless of any specific conformation– an authoritarian, coercive and unnatural character. For some, institution is a necessary evil, for others the sole obstacle to its removal is the obstinacy of the interested dominant classes in preventing access to a real liberation. The only admitted dichotomy, in this frame, is between authoritarianism and freedom, without compromise:

“Only in utopia and revolution is there true life, the institutional order is always only the evil residue which remains from ebbing utopias and revolutions” (Mannheim, 1991, p. 178).

Horizontality constantly contends a verticalist hegemony in the theoretical field and in the social sphere. For verticalism, the truth of a social organism, its real engine, cannot be found in the single preferences of the individual units that compose it. At an analytical level, we have to consider that individual expressions are not original: they are derived from some systemic injunctions. We mustn't look at the single parts of the system, but at the whole. Because the system is not the mere

¹ We have to consider that the distinction between analytic and normative dimension is often unlikely. It's an ideological way of depicting analytic work, in order to glorify it with the medals of neutrality and objectivity. If one thinks that in order to interpret social life we have to start “from the bottom”, they will immediately be driven to promote political projects aimed to value grassroots. And *vice versa*.

sum of its single parts, but a *sui generis* entity, which works like an organism, according to a principle of unity that we have to recognize. There are some “transcendental” and invisible dimensions that decisively inform the players involved in the system. The individual’s truth is not in what he claims to be and to prefer, nor in his behavior. His truth lies elsewhere. Verticalist logic imagines the existence of a central intentionality placed outside the phenomenal reality, i.e. beyond human interactions as they appear to the observer. In order to understand social life we need to locate and to decode this top-down intelligence, that underlies the whole system.

What is the political-ideological implication of this narrative? Society as it is, in its immanent dimension –as it appears to the naked eye– does not correspond to its real essence. Furthermore, it is not the “right” society. The result of the interaction between single molecules is not the best social condition attainable, *ergo* we need to build a different institutional device that can change things from the top. Ratifying spontaneous interactions means ratifying “injustice”, the law of the strongest. The form generated by spontaneous relationships is not necessarily good, nor the best attainable, as it is affected by invisible powers, behind which lurk the interests of the strongest people. We need to create instruments in order to deliberately forge the general framework of society, because its spontaneous building from grassroots is neither right nor desirable for the social players. Political institutions must “design” reality, adapting it to some selected values and principles of justice.

Mauro Magatti (2009) evokes two major political traditions of freedom that have markedly imprinted institutions during modernity: the liberal and the critical tradition. In the former, political institutions must only ensure that each one can wish, choose and pursue its own life project. Political power is prevented from influencing every aspect of citizen life. It must simply ease the flow of individual trajectories and make sure that everyone can realize their own life project without stopping others from achieving theirs. Public institutions are not involved in designing the general framework in which citizens operate; they don’t create “collective projects” (even if democratically discussed), but they only guarantee the “project of unlimited projectuality for all”: i.e., their sole purpose is to allow every individual to conceive and implement their unique project.

We call this the “unlimited accessibility” logic (Romano, 1993; 2008).

The problem is that this abstract granting of freedom evades the fact that each player is always integrated in a specific life context and their substantive opportunities largely depend on inherited conditions. Therefore the liberal imperative leads to a mere ratification of reality as it is. This implies that, by virtue of the socio-economic conditions in which they accidentally are, some will carry out major projects, others will fly low.

Also in the critical tradition the aim is to grant complete freedom to everyone. But the simple, neutral granting of freedom of action is not sufficient. Only the intervention of political power could promote real opportunities for citizens and achieve an effective state of freedom for the majority of people, setting a framework in which everyone can play their own game. This is not possible when public institutions simply ratify and give fluidity to the plots interwoven by social players. Political power is responsible for building order, because the spontaneous result of interaction is neither necessarily right, nor necessarily desirable. And most importantly, it isn’t in any case the one chosen by a community which wants to be independent and sovereign. Namely, the State must steer the development process of the country and then re-distribute its fruits through welfare and public bodies

The critical tradition aspires to change reality as the context where personal destinies are outlined. It aims to manage the fundamental conditions that produce the structure of opportunities for everyone. But this is only the minimum scope. The ideal thing would be to shape social life on the basis of the meanings and values elaborated collectively. So that the order will not be the *ex post* result of spontaneous molecular interactions, but a scene designed deliberately *ex ante* by society itself.

It’s easy to recognize the horizontalist shadow in the framework of political liberalism and the verticality logic in the critical school. But in both cases we are dealing with the tradition of freedom. It’s just two different ways of looking at reality, of conceiving truth and justice.

Horizontality and verticality are closely linked with the two great types of integrated culture identified by Sorokin (1985): the “*sensate*” and the “*ideational*” (pp. 25-28).²

In the sensate frame, reality is only that which is presented to the sense organs (it does not seek any supersensory reality). Reality is thought as a becoming, a process, a constant change, a flux, an evolution, a progress, a transformation. Human needs and aims are mainly physical and subjects are in a constant search for maximum satisfaction. For these aims the external world can be exploited either in an “active” logic (efficient modification, adjustment, readjustment, reconstruction of the external milieu) or in a “passive” mood (parasitic exploitation and utilization of the external reality as it is, viewed as the mere means for enjoying sensual pleasures), or even in a “cynical” way (that is, a sensate way masked by ideational inspiration).

For the ideational type of culture, conversely, reality is nonsensate and nonmaterial. Human needs and ends are mainly spiritual, and subjects tend to self-impose minimizations or eliminations of most of their physical needs. The ideational posture may undertake an “ascetic” way, that leads to detachment from the sensate world, or an “active” mood, that aims to the transformation of the sensate world, along the lines of spiritual reality.

During modernity a sort of “criss-cross alternation law”¹ between social regulation and thought has prevailed: when the social regulation is based on a horizontal model, we see the restructuring of social thought around a verticalist paradigm (moreover this imprint widens to social culture and imagery). And vice versa: when verticalism prevails in the structure of society, social and political thought embraces horizontalism.

Traditionally, thought goes on in opposition to the existing frame, even though, nowadays, we know well that the role played by intellectuals is increasingly that of revealing to us how to better adjust to the present time. Reflecting on the faults and critical issues of the existing model, intellectuals exalt the reverse form of society. So, when the institutional form takes a top-down orientation, then intellectuals begin to exalt the virtues of *laissez-faire*, *laissez-passer*. Reflecting on the knotty problems of the existing model, they invariably uphold to the opposite, reversed form. This lag, this oppositional dynamic between theory and institutions has proven very useful in moments of crisis. By focusing on the failings of the current model and simulating its development, theorists have been able to forecast the dire consequences of a given institutional order.

In this key, we can reconsider the main phases of Western modernity:

- 1815-1929: the ruling pattern embodies the freedom instances sparked by the French and American revolutions, translated into a constant loosening of the pre-modern communities and institutional bonds. Weber, Marx, Polanyi, Elias etc. interpret this passage as the progressive liberation of the “elementary particles” of society (labor and land, first of all), once grouped around the castle, the belfry, and corporations. The horizontalist logic of market exchange spreads all over the West, becoming dominant and producing an extraordinary development of productive forces. But thought proceeds in the opposite direction. The birth of scientific sociology itself can be re-interpreted as a verticalist reaction to market expansion. The founding fathers of sociology question the tenets of horizontalism, both from a theoretical point of view (against the emphasis on individuals imposed by market institutions, they claim that the real meaning of social life can only be understood by looking at society from the top, as a whole) and from the political point of view (a suitable and rightful functioning of society requires to go beyond the spontaneous result of interaction, by entrusting to a cockpit the “vertical” regulation of society). But firstly, they denounce the perverse effects of horizontalism on social ties, values and order. While horizontalism spreads on social regulation, thought tries to discover the recipe for what keeps society together. How is social order born and how can we make it last? When and why is it undermined? How can we restore it? With the liberation of elementary particles of society, order becomes a scarce resource, so a new science arises, which studies

² He also finds out two balanced sums of both pure types: *idealistic* and *pseudo-ideational*.

its production and reproduction. With the Wall Street crisis of 1929, all the chickens came home to roost. The following Great Depression is contrasted by what Polanyi (2001) calls the “self-defense of society”, i.e. a Great Transformation, whose deep meaning coincides with the reinstatement of sovereign public institutions in the management the three main productive factors: labor (the social legislations); land (agrarian protectionism); capital (the institution of central banks).

- 1930-1980: verticalism takes over –i.e. the State becomes the main force for social development. The hegemony of market exchange is replaced by a logic of redistribution. The new order branches out into diverse political forms (fascism, communism, social-democracy etc.) but it stabilizes after World War II with the spread of “societal capitalism” (Magatti, 2009), where a solid alliance is reached between labor and capital: the “visible hand” of the State exerts a strong power on the market. This era too will see an extraordinary economic growth (“*les trente glorieuses*” as the French call it), accompanied by unprecedented social development due to the welfare state redistribution strategy. Public institutions will give a “big push” to general wealth and rights. With the spread of this new verticalist, well-ordered and stabilized age, the constantly restless social theorists left the scene in search of disorder. They put aside the binoculars used by their predecessors and started using a microscope in order to discover the strategies of individuals, their fundamental role in transforming order. It is the dawn of the micro-sociology age. In unison, they unmask the pretensions of analytical verticalism: now, for understanding society we have to start from individuals, from their actions. Furthermore, they vibrantly denounced the risks included in the pretension of public institutions to limit and steer social action, calling for neutral governance. This mood also involved social imagery and social movements. A staunch criticism to any idea of identity, unity and order spreads everywhere, stigmatizing any attempt to give rules to the world. A disciplinary revolt overturns vertical institutions.
- 1981-2008: Fordism and welfare crisis at the end of the seventies marks the start in all western countries of a ruling pattern based on the stigma on public institutions and sovereign power. The self-organization principle replaces State primacy. In the economic sphere this translates into a firm return to market exchange extended to a global dimension. In the political realm we slide from government to governance. In the social domain, we witness the constant dismantling of welfare. However, the new model sees a rapid crisis. Like at the beginning of the twentieth century, the marketization of productive factors (land, labor and capital), sped up by ICT and financial devices, erodes the foundations of social life. Public institutions do not have the necessary resources any longer, or the tools to organize and safeguard their citizens.

As noted above, our thesis is that the traditional game between thought and ruling patterns (the criss-cross alternation law) is not working in the present crisis. The horizontalist society born at the beginning of the eighties is at a standstill, but a new (verticalist?) paradigm has not been prepared. We face a “paradigm delay”. Intellectuals, social scientists, the ruling class and social moments remove the crisis’ real nature, clinging to their horizontalist ideology. Instead of acknowledging the need for verticalism, they generally interpret the crisis (and react consequently) as the result of an unfaithful application of the horizontalist model to reality, thus contributing to canker the system. Degrowth is no exception.

Con-formist alternatives

The situation we face seems drawn by the beginning of the twentieth century culminating with the Great Depression of 1929. We face the classical consequences of the marketization of the factors of production (land, labor and capital). The system rejects the responsibility to deal with “habitation”, in favor of a blind social reproduction mechanism, that certainly triggers an extraordinary

development dynamics but that is unable to hold society together and give its members meaning and sustenance. Today, there is no thought that explicitly claims for society's self-defense, for the social re-appropriation of the three fundamental factors of production, a form of verticality (Polanyi, 2001). Whoever attempts to evoke a similar course remains on a merely allusive level, simply reacting to the dysfunctions of the current system, but failing to assume the responsibility of evoking and removing the problems that had arisen in the preceding age of verticality. If these tangles are not untied, a paradigm advance will not be imaginable.

The current reflexive strategies –to which degrowth belong– follow the pattern of the “conformist alternative”, based on a double movement:

- 1) first of all, they clearly and sharply denounce the harmful effects of the current regulation pattern, on different planes (economic, political, social, ecological and so on). These effects are nothing more than the manifestation of the classical problems of horizontal form, but the protagonists of such strategies tend not to recognize this link at all. The disasters of horizontalism are rather attributed to the “values” promoted by the system and not to its “form”.
- 2) Then, the suggested solutions, in order to face the drifts of the dominant pattern, always and invariably rank inside the horizontal form: the criticism against neo-liberalism is designed starting from a horizontalist perspective and the recipes to escape the crisis, although coming from different points of view and being often reciprocally opposed, are taken from the same thought stream from which the regulation pattern in disgrace draws inspiration. In order to face the disasters of horizontalism, these critical aggregates even suggest a radicalization, although in an “anti-liberal” mood, of the horizontal regulation form, i.e. its displacement onto other dimensions of social life (from the “market” to “grassroots”, for example). This radicalization and/or displacement is wrapped in the ideological attire of the “third way”: neither the State nor the market; neither collectivity nor individual; neither methodological holism nor methodological individualism. The ghost of a third dimension, namely the “relational” (Donati, 2012) one is followed, betting that it escapes the drifts of the other two, already experimented polarities. From the point of view of the dialectic between verticalism and horizontalism, this alleged third dimension is not to be found: it remains unequivocally trapped (mainly on the normative side, but also on the analytical one) inside the horizontal plane. A paradigm shift doesn't arise.

Degrowth alternative

Degrowth thought rapidly spreads not only in academic departments and reviews but also in anti-systemic movements (Kallis, Schneider, & Martinez-Alier, 2010).

Like all the conformist alternative, it is inhabited by a big paradox. It denounces the perverse effects of horizontalism alluding at the necessity to regain vertical regulation but then it promotes a radically horizontal alternative.

Beyond the recent economic crisis, the dominant regime –degrowthers claim– produces a much more worrying “ecological” and “social” crisis.

For Latouche –one of the main inspirers of the degrowth alternative– the growth regime has to be stigmatized because it jeopardizes life itself. We have to reverse it in order to preserve the survival chances of planet Earth and its inhabitants. A regime of unlimited growth is incompatible with the available non-renewable resources, with the regeneration speed of the biosphere and of renewable resources. So “a radical change is an absolute necessity [...] to avoid a brutal and tragic catastrophe” (Latouche, 2007, p. 10).

“Social” unsustainability is then added to ecological unsustainability.

First of all, the alleged well-being produced by the growth regime is “unmasked” as the fruit of illusionism. If we deduct from GDP –as it must be done– noxious products directly linked to the

externalities of growth (costs of pollution, health care, prisons etc.) we will discover its negative progression in all Western countries in the last decades (Matthey, 2010). Degrowthers also denounce the huge increase of inequalities and social injustice in growth societies. Finally, they affirm a counterintuitive equation: well-having causes the diminution of well-being. GDP growth, they show by reading critically the available data and statistics, is directly linked with increased unhappiness and, above all, with the weakening of social relations. So “we have to aspire to a better quality of life and not merely to an unlimited GDP growth” (Latouche, 2007, p. 62); “we have to split the improvement of individuals’ condition and the quantitative increase of material product, in other terms we have to foster the decrease of “well-having” measured by economic indicators in order to increase the really lived “well-being” (Latouche, 2007, p. 98); “human happiness does not depend on living more, but on living well” (Latouche, 2007, p. 117).

Degrowthers’ claims recall Polanyi’s typical arguments against blind growth in the nineteenth century. It is no coincidence that Latouche is a Polanyi scholar. In the final analysis, they do nothing more than stigmatize the effects of horizontal deregulation. When societies lose their sovereignty over the factors of production then social, economic and ecological disruption follows. But, contrary to Polanyi, they do not go so far as to require the restoration of a new vertical regime. The hegemony of horizontalism prevents this logical and natural outcome. Crushed, like everyone, by this ideology, degrowthers displace the focus of their diagnosis from “forms” to “values”. Ecological and social disruption, they assert, are not the effects of the “form” of the dominant regime (horizontal form is sacred and it cannot be questioned) but of the prevailing “value” of “growth for growth” that rages in the shared social imagination. So the fight is relocated in the sphere of values: it is necessary to shift from growth to degrowth. The horizontal form must not only be preserved but even radicalized.

The analytical incongruity is particularly evident regarding inequality: during the “verticalist” *thirty glorious years* growth was a keyword, nevertheless inequality sharply decreased. So it is remiss to ascribe the current strong increase of inequalities to faith in growth: it is only the effect of horizontal deregulation. And the same can be said for the ecological issue.

But the inconsistency of degrowth discourse mainly arises when we look to the core feature of the current regulation system. Horizontalism is founded on a clear separation between “functions” and “meanings” (Magatti, 2009). The social system does not fit into a particular idea of justice. It doesn’t obey any “value”. It is indifferent to any principle, aiming only to ensure that each singularity (the citizen and his networks) can freely play his game on the basis of his specific values. This “passivity” determines, in the final analysis, ecological, social and economic deregulation.

Moreover, it is the real fount of the emphasis on “growth”. As we have already seen, in fact, the “neutralist” root of the horizontal regime requires an a-teleological political institution that never meddles in the sense of associated life, because it must only be the spontaneous outcome of the interactions between individuals. In these conditions, politics is only called to ensure the preservation or, better, the promotion (“growth for growth”) of the “biological” citizens’ lives and to regulate at best the circulation of them all. Politics limits itself to making life grow, so that the living being can do what he wants with it. So growth is nothing else than the translation of the modern principle of neutrality: it is “rightly” indifferent to any goal, if not to that of increasing everybody’s material chances to choose and implement his goals. After all, the principle of “growth for growth” is equivalent to the principle of “life for life’s sake”, in fact supported by degrowthers in their claim to protect planet Earth from a catastrophe.

The ethical dimension is totally harmless for the horizontal regime, which rather promotes the unlimited proliferation of values and meanings, even reciprocally antithetical. So it is incongruous to challenge it by a values’ fight. It requires that the whole citizenship adopts a certain set of values (namely those linked to “degrowth” society). Degrowthers bet that this aim could be pursued by a strategy of “voluntary simplicity” (Romano, 2012): activists secede from the public arena where the majority of people lie, in order to build a small world together with those who only share the same

values and visions. Obeying this path, an elite, most “aware” of the necessity of degrowth, will give the good example, staging degrowth practices, here and now, without waiting to “take the power”. Degrowthers promote collective and personal experiences of simplicity; they engage in voluntary simplicity circles, found small degrowth or other eco-communities, all done in the hope that their practical virtues will stand out so obviously and infect the rest of the citizens, those “poor ones” who are still unaware. This action is not political in the traditional sense of the term. Degrowthers do not pretend to participate in the competition for the conquest of institutions. Faithful to horizontalism, they act immediately in the social domain, giving concrete proof of the feasibility of a degrowth alternative.

But the current hegemony of growth is not the outcome of a cultural investment operated by malefic powers. It derives from the neutralist regime, as we have seen, and also from the liberation of the elementary particles decreed by horizontalism: once “disembedded” from society, individuals are naturally led to undertake the path of growth, due to the feeling of precariousness increased by isolation.

In fact, in the words of Bataille (1988):

“As a rule, *particular* existence always risks succumbing for lack of resources. It contrasts with *general* existence whose resources are in excess and for which death has no meaning. From the *particular* point of view, the problems are posed *in the first instance* by a deficiency of resources. They are posed *in the first instance* by an excess of resources if one starts from the *general* point of view (p. 39).

In a society framed by horizontality, the individualized being is bound by the precarious nature of its existence and therefore obsessed with the problem of its survival. When isolated, it embraces a fundamentally servile position and reverts to the status of an animal, in which obtaining resources is central. The individual point of view that emphasizes the insufficiency of resources gets applied to the general collective.

So the problem cannot be solved by an improbable ethical change. It is a systemic problem that requires an intervention on the “form” of society. On this plane, degrowth is not at all an alternative to the dominant regime. Rather, it cultivates the secret cult of a life beyond any form. In the words of Sorokin (1985), degrowthers promote a “sensate”, as opposed to “ideational” culture: they only prefer a “passive sensate” mood against the “active sensate” orientation developed by growth society. But the “immanentist” devotion doesn’t change, so it cannot be considered an alternative to the horizontal regime.

Conclusion

Degrowth has to displace its fight from values to “form”, abandoning the devotion to the horizontal frame. It is the only way to attain a sovereign regime that could assure the reproduction of renewable resources and the preservation of non-renewable resources, granting a kind of social life released from the obsession for growth. This will be impossible if we remain trapped in the political and social framework of horizontality.

As a rule, current horizontalism creates a structural mismatch between “sovereign regimes”, based on pursuing (autonomously selected) extra-market values, and “servile regimes” exclusively concerned with the implementation of global economic efficacy. Apart from occasional exceptions, the latter has the best. We must never forget Weber’s (1992) lesson about the totalitarian character of capitalistic norms:

“The manufacturer who in the long run acts counter to these norms will be eliminated from the economic scene just as inevitably as the worker who cannot or will not adapt himself to them will be thrown into the street without a job.

Thus the capitalism of today, which has come to dominate economic life, educates and selects the economic subjects which it needs through a process of economic survival of the fittest” (pp. 19-20).

A “third way” is impossible. The idea that the global arena is a neutral space in which it is possible to build social alternatives, according to self-selected values and norms is unrealistic.

We are not facing a global crisis. We are facing the crisis of “sovereign” regimes. Emerging regions are fed by their defrosting. In order to survive, sovereign regimes have to fence their space and to protect it from global competitive flows.

We have to choose whether to remain in the animalism of competition (perpetuating servilism) or in the real sovereignty, so protecting and preserving the needed resources from the servile external assault. Vertical modernity (that has assured freedom and justice) has been always founded on protection, on the self-defense of society. This is, as Polanyi asserted, the physiology in the history of human communities. While the self-regulating market is the exception. See, for example, the reduction of work time to eight hours a day at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is clearly a protectionist act. Inside the space of the nation-state, commodities can no longer contain more than eight hours a day of the work factor. An autonomous value defined by society (the need for its members to work less than eight hours in order to have a more dignified life) has primacy on what the market, in its “natural” run towards efficacy, would have determined (certainly more than eight hours). It is necessary to reinforce this logic, not to abandon it. Protectionism is the basis of civilization, despite its bad reputation. The resources to have a sovereign life, beyond growth *diktat*, are certainly available.

It is necessary to develop the macro-regional logic (enlarging, for example, the EU to South Mediterranean countries), but completely overturning its goal: no longer international competition, but the collective wealth of the inner populations, respectful of the environmental balances. Today macro-regional “vertical” power is used, where it exists, to shape the available factors of production in order to better compete, to make the use of internal resources more effective, to locally attain the minimal cost required by the global market, regardless of any consideration on the wealth of people, on the idea of “good life” we want to develop. The illusion is that the more we are able to produce wealth, the more people will benefit from it and everyone will use it to implement his own idea of a good life. We remain slaves of the global market.

We have to use power and to recover verticality not to indulge but to escape the path of global efficacy. We have to self-repair from the competitive barbarism, in order to attain “social” and “environmental” efficacy. The reversal of mainstream strategy. If we don’t choose this way in a progressive frame, then nationalisms and religious fundamentalism –who promise protection and communitarian warmth in a regressive frame to people devastated by the fury of globalism– will certainly spread. We have instead to bet on the *tertium non datur* of a high and large (also in a mere physical sense) form of protection, today incompatible with the dominant logics of social dumping. We have to restart from a consideration: the level of productivity attained by the production factors, due to our organizational and technological infrastructure, are very high, even when they are well below the efficacy threshold decreed by global competition. We certainly hold the means to assure everybody a dignified life. At a global level, we have never produced such a large amount of wealth.

Nevertheless we are in a crisis. Capitalism has failed in the task of redistributing wealth. Politics is no longer concerned with redistribution but tries only to actively contribute to attaining efficacy. In a well protected space we would produce beneath the threshold of global efficacy, but anyway autonomously and fitting people needs. Public powers have to centralize the profits of energy resources and seize the yield on general intellect, so that citizens can enjoy them, at the same time attaining high standards of environmental and social protection. Public power has to assure that people can work a few hours and in dignified conditions, preventing the social system from being sucked in and governed by global efficacy. Public power must stop the growth logic (that is only justified by the need to escape sovereignty and whose perverse effects in terms of environmental and social sustainability are already clear) and watch over the maintenance of a steady state.

European and Mediterranean countries could form a civilization alliance against global barbarism. Showing to the world the feasibility of this alternative will be the basis of a new internationalism, gathering the masses wounded by the witless and blind pursuit of global efficacy (Romano, 2014).

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¹ We well know that talking about “laws” in social matters is always fetched: it’s only an ironical way to name what is nothing more than a working hypothesis.