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Beyond globalization – the legacy of Richard Douthwaite (1942 – 2011) for a degrowth economy

First Contribution: the scientific work of Richard Douthwaite

Richard Douthwaite, economist and writer, co-founder of FEASTA, the Irish society for the economics of sustainability, died in November 2011. His scientific work encompasses a wealth of studies involving economic, political and social analysis focusing on the question of economic growth and alternatives to it, showing possible paths to a sustainable future.

The first contribution to the special session on the legacy of Richard Douthwaite is an attempt to carve out his most important theoretical findings to show to what extent the work of Richard Douthwaite can be seen as a convincing foundation to a degrowth strategy, and how this foundation can be used to develop practical suggestions towards its political realization. But accepting these basic convictions would mean, according to Richard Douthwaite, to start working on a comprehensive transformation of the economy both in theory and in practice, especially concerning the monetary and the financial systems.

The contribution will show that his book „The Growth Illusion – How Economic Growth Enriched the Few, Impoverished the Many, and Endangered the Planet“ (1992) has been a path-breaking analysis of the history of growth economies since the middle ages. Within this framework, it is argued that capitalism cannot survive without growth, and that the growth process did bring benefits not to the majority of the people. Growth, therefore, should be put to a stop, and new technologies should have to be assessed before implementation whether they benefit society and the environment.

Already in 1992, Richard Douthwaite gave an impressive argumentation why there won't be something like long term sustainable growth. The analysis in this book ends with an appeal to „guide the invisible hand“, to make it visible, so to speak, by regaining a new quality in economic argumentation by understanding economics as moral philosophy in a modern way.

Richard Douthwaite continued to analyse the different forms, mechanisms and consequences of economic growth; one of the later volumes to this topic was no. 2 of the FEASTA review that he edited under the headline „Growth – the celtic cancer.“

The contribution will move on to point out that one of Richard Douthwaite's answers to the growth question was to counteract the increasing globalization of the economy. Another of his volumes – „Short circuit“, from 1996, enlarged for a German edition „Jenseits der Globalisierung: Handbuch für lokales Wirtschaften“ with Hans Diefenbacher in 1998 – showed a wealth of small scale practical solutions to overcome the risks of economic and environmental collapse. But the idea to build up a new local or regional economic system as a safe operating space to avoid importing risks from the globalized economy was again in itself focused to criteria developed from a stringent theoretical analysis, resulting in the formulation of four basic steps towards greater local self reliance (Douthwaite 1996, 50):

- the production of the area's basic food and clothing requirements without the use of imports from outside;
- the production of enough energy from local renewable resources to meet the area's needs