



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Transition to Degrowth Facilitated by Existing Shadow Society

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The addiction of modern societies and their members to growth is so severe that for many it seems wholly unrealistic to wean them from it. One feels that there is no hope for change and turns away from degrowth thinking. Therefore it is worth considering some assumptions on which the hopelessness is based.

A reason to view degrowth as unrealistic is the habit to conceptualize societies and their members as integrated and functional wholes. Instead, when perceiving society and people in it as fractured, full of cleavages, the transition to degrowth seems more possible. Only part of the fragments are at a time easily visible and are considered to constitute the society proper. The rest of the fragments are kept in shadow and are not regarded as essential.

Shadow society

A common assumption making major social changes to seem impossible is that people and society really are what you see in the official institutions. Society is the state plus the official economy. People are citizens, voters, schoolchildren, students, patients, workers, employees, craftsmen, professionals, entrepreneurs, employers, owners, investors, debtors, consumers and so on. What they are or do additionally, is of marginal importance. From this perspective society is by and large a well-functioning whole which is possible to change only modestly.

But underneath and parallel to the official structures and roles, there is another world of thought, activity and social relations. It's important to remember that the majority of these and those dutiful citizens, workers and consumers are also mothers and fathers. When their children are small, they produce an enormous amount of food, cleaning, care and other essential services in their homes, for which they are not paid. Often the only thing preventing them from breaking down under the workload is the help given by informal circles of friends, relatives, neighbours and peers.

The informal work done by parents, unemployed, retired pensioners and other people, as well as social relations supporting it, are so extensive that one can speak about an alternative economy existing in the midst of any modern society, as some degrowth thinkers have emphasised. In addition to it and partly overlapping with it, there is another already existing alternative economy: that based on material and non-material common wealth created by nature and cultures.

The informal sphere of the society is not at all of marginal importance: its proper functioning and continuing existence are often a matter of life and death. Therefore people are often ready to fight if this economy is threatened. These conflicts are widespread because from the official perspective, informal sector contains only poorly utilized resources that must be brought into productive use. In the fight to defend the informal economy, alternative forms of political organizing and democratic decision making may develop.

Of course capitalism needs the non-capitalistic forms of production and wealth. Without unpaid housework and free access to social and natural common wealth, it would hardly be possible to accumulate capital. In this sense nature, homes and "leisure" are subordinated to capitalism.

But the exploitative relationship is only one side of the story. Activities at homes, voluntary work and taking care of common wealth are based on different values and logic. On the other hand, these activities cultivate and maintain a different way of relating to matters, a different value system. This kind of ensemble of activities that both rise from a value system and create it, can be called value practise.

Even though consumer culture has an influence on the shadow side of society, much of it is not permeated by the growth logic. Instead of "more", its proclaimed or inferred, and often also realized, values are moderation, equality, mutual aid, supporting the weak and generally living well with fellow human and other beings.

Social and subjective overspill

Thus both in politics and in economy, a wide variety of such important activities, social interactions, group formations and other processes are constantly occurring which are not integrated into the official institutions. The institutionalization process of the society is incomplete and open. In a way there exists a 'social overspill' that makes society more flexible and explains many phenomena, which cannot be accounted for if one looks only at official institutional structures.

The same applies on the individual level to subject formation. The personality of a woman or a man acting both in official and informal roles has many fractures. He or she is not a consistent whole. Different value practises in a way cross a person and divide her or him. One way to describe this is to say that the human personality is almost always divided to a certain extent. Only in extreme cases it is a matter of such a disorder that can

be classified as mental illness.

This inconsistency is compounded by the fact that in official institutions there are many internal contradictions, and the dominant ideology is often incapable of containing them. For instance, the official doctrines of states and companies are full of noble principles, emptiness of which is obvious for many insiders.

The “subjective overspill” is partly channelled to unofficial activities, partly it exists only as dreams and as potentiality for a future society. Thus even under the polished face of a loyal and diligent worker and citizen there may be a surprise waiting.

Different value practices inside and among human beings and their contradictions are essential in social change. The existing non-capitalistic value practices can function as sprouts which in proper conditions grow quickly into a new social whole. When a major social change is happening, it may be powered by the social and subjective overspill which comes more and more from the background to the fore. The primary front-line between the old order and the new horizon is not the one between them and us. Instead it will divide almost everyone from inside. From this perspective, the question of violence in major social changes takes on a new light: You have no reason to kill a person if a half of him is already on your side and the other half may follow.

The collapse of the Soviet Bloc is an example of the phenomenon. At least decades before the big change the society and people were riddled with cleavages between the official and the unofficial. Anyone travelling in these countries usually came across on these fractures. Officially a person was a dutiful cleric in a state institution, but in practice he used his time to organize food and other necessities for his relatives or did voluntary work in a cultural heritage association. He was a master in double-thinking. The cleavages found its expression in political jokes circulating everywhere. People worked half-heartedly and in practice sabotage was widespread. Accordingly, the economy and political apparatus functioned poorly. When things started to change, one and the other found their oppositional side even among the party elite. Soon the hollowed-out society collapsed.

Another case is Argentine, a country resembling western Europe in many respects. In just a few weeks, the economic collapse in 2001 changed countless supporters of middle class values into activists demanding and making a radical social change. As the official society was stagnating, a new polity and economy began to form on the basis of neighbourhood assemblies, occupied factories and moneyless goods exchanges.

Also the recent Ukrainian revolution shows how invisible undercurrents of discontent can quickly create a powerful movement than is able to knock down self-evident truths of Realpolitik. Unfortunately, it also shows how dedicated fascist forces can in a critical situation mould a movement, increase violence, and get credence among people who would otherwise find fascist ideas repugnant.

Conclusion

Degrowth theorists have conceptualized the shift to degrowth society in two opposite ways: either it is continuation of the present by reforming the prevailing economic system, or it is a radical break from the present. For different reasons the shift seems to be impossible in both cases. Either the proposed change is too little to make a dent in the growth logic or the proposed transformation is too big ever to start. The approach delineated in this paper suggests a third angle. The shift could be continuation of the present *and* a radical break at the same time. It could be based on the existing shadow society and the shadow sides of ordinary human beings but it would extend them and bring them into light. At the same time the shift would marginalize and overshadow the prevailing present.

Degrowth activists promote such a radical inversion by avoiding the trap of activist ghettos and organizing instead open but radical movements based on the assumption that almost every human being has a side that could participate in them. Such movements have potentiality to make degrowth reality.

For degrowth theorists, a method to promote the radical inversion, proposed in this paper, is to deconstruct official economic, social and psychological narratives and create a new, more accurate one. Keeping a well-reflecting mirror in front of us we can see besides crimes and ugliness of growth society also the goodness and beauty emanating from our everyday activities. Straining our eyes we may catch a glimpse of another world in the mirror.