

# Chapter 17

## The Path to Degrowth for a Sustainable Society

Serge Latouche

**Abstract** The word degrowth has been recently used in the ecological, economic and social debate; it started being used in 2002 as a provocative slogan to denounce the mystification of the ideology of sustainable development. It now designates a complex alternative project, with undeniable analytical and political significance. It is about first escaping from consumption society and then building a durable society of prosperity without growth or frugal abundance. Thus degrowth is not the alternative, but rather a matrix of alternatives that opens the human adventure to a plurality of destinies and space for creativity, while removing the lead blanket of economic totalitarianism. Degrowth therefore offers a general framework that provides meaning to many sectorial initiatives or local resistances favoring strategic compromises and tactical alliances. This project may seem like a pipe dream today but it is extremely realistic if we want to avoid the collapse of human society in the future.

**Keywords** Bioeconomy • Degrowth • Development • Decolonization (of the imaginary) • Sustainable development

### 17.1 Why This Neologism?

Portraying degrowth as a version of sustainable development, as has been done by some authors (Zaccai 2007), makes little sense historically, theoretically and politically in regard to the meaning and significance of the initiative. The motto of degrowth was almost accidentally launched by a pressing need to break with the wooden language of sustainable development that was felt by whole streams of political ecology and development critics (Revue Silence 2002). Thus the phrase is not originally a concept (at least not symmetrically to growth) but rather a defiant political slogan with the main objective of reminding us of the meaning of limits; more specifically, degrowth is neither recession nor negative growth.

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S. Latouche (✉)  
Université de Paris-Sud, Orsay, France  
e-mail: [serge.latouche@free.fr](mailto:serge.latouche@free.fr)

The word should not be interpreted literally: degrowing to degrow would be as absurd as growing to grow. Of course, *degrowthers* want the quality of life, air and water to grow, along with several other things that growth for the sake of growth destroyed. To speak more rigorously, we should probably employ the word a-grow, with the Greek privative prefix “a”, as we say a-theism. And it is, as a matter of fact, the abandon of faith and religion: those of progress and development. We should become atheists of growth and the economy. The rupture of degrowth is therefore related to both words and things, it implies the *decolonization* of the imaginary and the implementation of another possible world.

## 17.2 History, Causes and Meaning of Degrowth

While chance did play a role in the sequence of events, it was a need that can be rightfully called historic that led to the apparition of a radical movement offering a real alternative to the consumption society and the dogma of growth. Facing the triumph of ultra-liberalism and the arrogant proclamation of Margaret Thatcher’s famous TINA (there is no alternative), small anti-development freemason groups could no longer get by with a quasi confidential, theoretical criticism for *Third Worldists*. However, the other face of the triumph of single-thought ideology was no other than the consensual “sustainable development” slogan, a nice oxymoron that was launched by UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) to try to save the religion of growth in the ecological crisis and which seemed to be well accepted by the anti-globalization movement. It became urgent to oppose the capitalism of a globalized market with another civilization project or, more specifically, to give visibility to a plan that had been in formation for a long time, but progressed underground. The rupture with *developmentism*, a form of productivism for the use of so-called developing countries, was thus the foundation of this alternative project.

Are we therefore dealing with another economic paradigm contesting neo-classical orthodoxy, similar to what Keynesianism did back in the day? That is how some try to label it following Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen’s bioeconomy project. Clearly, other political economies are possible in a growth society. The so-called “*trentes glorieuses*”<sup>1</sup> period (1945–1975) that saw the triumph of Keynes-Fordist regulation is proof. Nonetheless, in a growth society without growth – which is the current situation of industrialized countries – alternatives to neo-liberal inspired policies seem impossible without calling into question the economic system and/or exacerbating the ecological crisis.

In fact, it is a defiant slogan to break the soft consensus of submission to the dominant productivist order. The eponymous movement was born during the colloquium “*Défaire le développement, refaire le monde*”<sup>2</sup> (Undoing development, redoing the world) which was held in March 2002 at UNESCO, an intellectual

<sup>1</sup> English: The Glorious Thirty.

<sup>2</sup> Proceedings published as *Défaire le développement, refaire le monde*, Parangon, Lyon, 2002.

adventure that was reinforced a few months later by the birth of the newspaper that was its echo chamber. Degrowth quickly became the rallying cry of all those aspiring to the construction of a true alternative to an environmentally and socially unsustainable consumption society, and from then on it was a *performative fiction* representing the need for a rupture with growth society and the birth of a frugally abundant one.

The degrowth project does not aim for *another* growth, nor for another kind of development (sustainable, social, fair, etc.), but rather for the construction of *another* society, a society of *frugal abundance*, a *post-growth* society (Paech 2012), or one of *prosperity without growth* (Jackson 2009). In other words, it is not an economic project from the outset, not even of another economy, but a *societal* project that implies an exit of economy as a reality and as imperialist discourse. The word degrowth from now on designates a complex alternative project with an undeniable analytical and political reach.

### 17.3 The Imposture of Growth as an Organic Metaphor

Growth is a natural phenomenon and, as such, is undisputed. The biological cycle of birth, development, maturation, decline and death of life and its reproduction are also a precondition for the survival of the human species, which needs to metabolize with its vegetal and animal environment. Mankind first celebrated the cosmic forces that ensured their well-being in the symbolic form of gratitude for this interdependence and their debt towards nature in this regard. The problem begins when the line between symbols and reality disappears.

While all human societies rightfully worshipped growth, only modern western civilization made it its religion. The product of capital, resulting from a trick or market deception and most often from exploitation of workers and predation of nature, is assimilated to the recovery of plants. The economic organism, that is the organization of the survival of society, is no longer in symbiosis with nature but rather exploits it mercilessly and must indefinitely grow, just like its fetish, capital. The reproduction of capital/economy combines fertility and regeneration, the interest rate and the growth rate. This climax of economy/capital leads to consumer society's fantasy of immortality. This is how *growth societies* are lived.

Growth society can be defined as a society dominated by a growth economy, and that tends to be absorbed by it. Hence growth for the sake of growth becomes the main or even the only objective of the economy and life. It is not about growing to satisfy recognized needs, which would be a good thing, but just growing to grow. Consumer society is the normal outcome of a growth society. It rests on triple unlimitation: unlimited production and thus of the harvesting of renewable and non-renewable sources, unlimited production of needs – and thus superfluous production – and unlimited waste generation which leads to the emission of waste and pollution (of air, land and water).



In order to be sustainable and lasting, every society needs to set limits. But our society takes pride in being free of all constraints and chose excess. Admittedly, something in human nature motivates individuals to surpass themselves. This is both a strength and a threat. Thus all societies except for ours tried to channel this aspiration and to harness it for the common good. In fact, it is not detrimental when it is invested in things such as non-commodified sports. However, it becomes destructive when the impulse of greed (the constant quest for more) is left unchecked, as well as accumulation of merchandize and money. It is therefore necessary to find a sense of limits again, in order to ensure the survival of humanity and the planet. The point of degrowth is to escape from a society that was absorbed by the fetishism of growth. The *decolonization of the imaginary* is primordial to do so.

## 17.4 The Decolonization of the Imaginary

The idea and project of the decolonization of the imaginary have two main sources: on one hand, Cornélius Castoriadis' philosophy, and on the other hand, the anthropologic critic of imperialism. These two sources are naturally also at the origins of degrowth, just like ecological criticism. Castoriadis understandably places the emphasis on the imaginary, whereas the anthropologists of imperialism focus on decolonization. Coming back to these two sources allows us to coin the exact meaning of the expression "decolonizing the imaginary".

The use of this performative expression goes without saying in Castoriadis' approach even though he never directly used it, to my knowledge. For the author of *The imaginary institution of society* (Castoriadis 1975), social reality is the implementation of *imaginary meanings*, in other words representations with mobilize affects. However, if growth and development are beliefs, and hence *imaginary social meanings*, just as progress and all the foundation categories of the economy, we need to change the imaginary in order to escape them, abolish them and move past them (the famous Hegelian *Aufhebung*).

The achievement of a degrowth society requires the decolonization of our imaginary to really change the world, before changes in the world condemn us to it painfully. This is the strict application of Castoriadis' teaching. "What is required," he notes, "is a new imaginary creation of previously unseen importance, a creation that would place at the center of human life meanings different from the expansion of production and consumption, that would set new life objectives that can be perceived as worthwhile by human beings [...] This is the enormous difficulty we need to face. We should want a society where economic values are no longer central (or unique), where economy is relegated to its place as a simple means to human life rather than an ultimate end, where we refuse the race to constantly increased consumption. This is not only necessary to avoid the final destruction of the terrestrial environment, but also and most importantly to escape the psychic and moral misery of contemporary humans." (Castoriadis 1996, p. 96). In other words, this much needed exit from *sur-modern* consumer and show society is also extremely desirable.

“But in order to have such a revolution,” adds Castoriadis, “deep changes need to occur in the psychosocial organization of the western man, in his attitude towards life, in short in his imaginary. The idea that the only goal in life is to produce and consume more – an idea both absurd and degrading – must be abandoned; the capitalist imaginary of a pseudo-rational pseudo-mastery, of unlimited expansion, must be abandoned. This can only be done by men and women. A single individual or an organization can only, at best, prepare, criticize and sketch possible directions” (Castoriadis 2005, p. 244).

Before attempting to plan an exit from the dominating imaginary, we must first return to the way we entered it, that is to the process of the *economization* of spirits simultaneous to the *commodification* of the world; in other words, an analysis of the way the economy was instituted in the modern western imaginary.<sup>3</sup>

The uprooting of a belief can readily be formulated through a *decolonization* metaphor in the analysis of North/South relations. The colonization term, commonly used by anti-imperialist anthropology about mentalities, can be found in the titles of several works. Octave Manonni probably led the way with his psychology of the colonized, but Gérard Althabe, a follower of Georges Balandier, more explicitly names his studies on Madagascar *Oppression and liberation in the imaginary* in 1969. Most importantly, in 1988 Serge Gruzinski published *The colonization of the imaginary*, with a subtitle referring to the same westernizing process (Gruzinski 1988). Nonetheless, when Gruzinski mentions the colonization of the imaginary, he is still referring to the colonization process in the strict sense of the term, in this case to the conversion of indigenous people by missionaries. The change of religion is both a deculturation of spirits and an acculturation to christianism and western civilization within the frame of the imperialist project. This refers to true oppression in the imaginary, implemented not only with symbolic means if we remember the stakes of inquisition that were often used by Spanish conquerors in the new world.

With growth and development, we are facing a process of conversion of mentalities, thus of an ideological and quasi-religious nature, aiming to institute the imaginary of progress and the economy, whereas the *rape of the imaginary*, to use Aminata Traoré’s beautiful expression, stays symbolic (Traoré 2002). With the colonization of the imaginary in the West, we are dealing with a mental invasion of which we are both the victims and the agents. It is mainly an auto-colonization, partly voluntary slavery.

The expression “decolonization of the imaginary” creates a semantic slip. Its originality lies in the accent placed on the particular shape taken by the inverse process from the one analyzed by anthropologists. It consists of a *software* change or paradigm change or even a true revolution of the imaginary, as claimed by West Indian writer Edouard Glissant. It is first and foremost a cultural revolution, but also goes beyond that. It is about escaping the economy, changing values and thus *decolonizing* ourselves. This is exactly the program that degrowth “supporters” are developing for the post-development project.

<sup>3</sup>We tried to develop this in the book *L’invention de l’économie* (Latouche 2005).



Getting out of the dominating or *colonial* imaginary is a central question both for Castoriadis and for anti-imperialist anthropologists, but it is a very difficult one because one cannot decide to change their imaginary and even less the imaginary of other people, especially if they are “addicted” to the drug of growth. The first thought goes to education, *paideia*, which plays a crucial role according to Castoriadis: “What is the meaning of, for example, liberty or the possibility for citizens participation, he asks, if the society we are discussing is lacking something – which is disappearing from contemporary discussions [...] – which is *paideia*, the education of the citizen? It is not about teaching him arithmetic, it is about teaching him how to be a citizen. Nobody is born a citizen. And how do we become it? By learning to be it. We learn, first, by looking at the city we are in. And certainly not the television we watch today” (Castoriadis 2010, p. 96).

However, the withdrawal cure is only possible if degrowth society has already been achieved. We should first have exited consumer society and its “civic moronization” regime, which traps us in a cycle we must break. Denouncing aggressive advertising, the vehicle of today’s ideology, is certainly the starting point to escape what Castoriadis calls “televisual and consumerist onanism” (Castoriadis 2010, p. 194). The fact that the newspaper “La décroissance”<sup>4</sup> came from the organization “Ad breakers” is not really due to chance, since advertisement is the main spring of growth society, and the growth objection movement is greatly and naturally linked to the resistance to aggressive advertising.

## 17.5 The Way Forward

Finally, degrowth is not *the alternative*, but rather a matrix of alternatives that reopens the human adventure to a plurality of destinies and the space of creativity, by lifting the lead blanket of economic totalitarianism. This is about exiting the paradigm of *homo æconomicus* or Marcuse’s one-dimensional man, the main source of planetary homogenization and the suicide of cultures. Consequently, the a-growth society will not be established the same way in Europe, in sub-saharan Africa or in Latin America, in Texas and in Chiapas, in Senegal and in Portugal. It is crucial to favor or rediscover diversity and pluralism. Therefore we cannot suggest a turnkey model of a degrowth society, but only an outline of the essentials for any non-productivist sustainable society, in addition to concrete examples of transition programs.

Nonetheless, transition programs will necessarily be reformist. Thus many “alternative” propositions that do not explicitly claim to support degrowth can find their place. In this way, degrowth is a general framework that gives meaning to many sectorial or local struggles and favors strategic compromises and tactical alliances. Leaving the economic imaginary with nevertheless require concrete ruptures. It will be necessary to set rules that frame and limit the lack of control and

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<sup>4</sup>Degrowth in French.

greed of agents (chasing profit, always more): ecological and social protectionism, labor legislation, limitation of company sizes, etc. And first and foremost, the “decommodification” of the three *fictitious* merchandises, which are work, the earth, and currency, according to Karl Polanyi. Their removal from the globalized market would mark the starting point of a reincorporation/reembedding of economic matters in social ones, while simultaneously fighting against the *spirit* of capitalism.

The redefinition of happiness as frugal abundance in a fair society that corresponds to the rupture created by the degrowth project requires exiting the vicious circle of unlimited creation of needs and products and the increasing frustration it creates. Self-limitation is the condition to achieve prosperity without growth and thus avoid the collapse of human civilization.

The recent debates on the relevance of wealth indicators served as a reminder of the inconsistency of GDP (gross domestic product) as an indicator to measure well-being, while it is the untouchable functional fetish of growth society. We did not sufficiently notice in this occasion that it is the ontological inconsistency of the economy itself that is thus underlined. When we criticize GDP, we shake the very foundations of the belief in the economy or the economy as a belief. Economy as a discourse presupposes its object, economic life, which only exists as such because of it. In fact, regardless of the definition we give political economy, be it a classical one (production, distribution, consumption) or a neo-classical one (optimal allocation of rare resources for alternative use), the economy online exists when it presupposes itself. The specific field of practice and targeted theory can only be limited if wealth and the allocation of resources only concern the economy. Garry Becker is more coherent by stating that everything that is the object of a human desire is rightfully part of the economy, but if everything is economical, then nothing is anymore. In this case the omni-quantification of social matters and the obsession with calculation it illustrates are only the result of a power grab, the one of the institution of capitalism as *omnicommodification* of the world.

The degrowth movement intends to oppose this transformation of the world into a commodity which was largely caused by globalization.

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## **Part III**

# **Examples of Good Practice**

## Chapter 18

# Social Innovation Repair – The R.U.S.Z Case: A Systemic Approach Contributing to the Unplanned Obsolescence of Capitalism

Sepp Eisenriegler and Greta Sparer

**Abstract** Repair and Service Centre R.U.S.Z (Reparatur- und Service-Zentrum R.U.S.Z) is a social business and a service for consumer protection and sustainability. In 1998 it started as a work integration social enterprise for long-term unemployed persons creating and using the business model of a sustainable repair shop. R.U.S.Z founded the success story Repair Network Vienna with some 80 SME members. It was among the initiators of the Austrian umbrella organization RepaNet and its EU equivalent RREUSE, which gather social enterprises with activities in re-use, repair and recycling. These networks help making advocacy work successful. Today, R.U.S.Z is Austria's biggest independent repair centre for electrical and electronic appliances for all kinds and brands and a centre of excellence for the fight against planned obsolescence, for consumer protection and social businesses. Moreover, R.U.S.Z is working for the transformation of the current linear economy into a circular economy.

R.U.S.Z' primary objectives are resource efficiency and social inclusion. R.U.S.Z provides repair services for household appliances, consumer electronics and IT. It sells certified, high-quality used equipment as well as new washing machines that were diagnosed in the in-house R&D department as particularly durable and easily repairable. From 1998 to 2007, R.U.S.Z was commissioned by the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS). R.U.S.Z was successfully transformed into a not-for-profit private enterprise in 2008. Today, it operates on a cost-recovery basis and employs more than 20 former long-term unemployed people. R.U.S.Z has been leading many initiatives to replicate its model and also lifts the barriers it is facing, both in Austria and Europe by initiating changes in national and EU policies.

**Keywords** Growth driven economy • Planned obsolescence • Resource depletion • Circular economy • Repair services • Product service systems

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S. Eisenriegler (✉) • G. Sparer  
Reparatur- und Service-Zentrum R.U.S.Z, Lützowgasse 12-14, 1140 Wien, Austria  
e-mail: [sepp.eisenriegler@rusz.at](mailto:sepp.eisenriegler@rusz.at); [greta.sparer@rusz.at](mailto:greta.sparer@rusz.at)

## 18.1 The Beginnings

R.U.S.Z (Reparatur- und Service-Zentrum) was founded in 1998 in Vienna as a social economy enterprise<sup>1</sup> for reintegrating long-term unemployed persons and other people at risk into the labour market. Initially, the project was commissioned by the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) and supported by the Vienna Adult Education (VHS), the Environmental Counselling Vienna (Umweltberatung Wien), the Viennese Municipality (MA 48) and the European Union. R.U.S.Z started its activities with 12 people at risk who got working contracts limited up to 12 months (temporary workers), two administrative employees and one qualified social education worker. The temporary workers included long-term unemployed persons, persons with disabilities and former offenders. Most of them were men over 45 years of age.

All repair activities were carried out by the temporary workers. This was only possible because some of them were already trained technicians who could train the others, who in turn would train newcomers. Therefore, it was one of the important gains of R.U.S.Z when the first technicians got permanent contracts in 1999. For every temporary worker who became a permanent staff member, four new temporary workers had to be employed, following the guidelines of AMS.

Regarding operational activities, the original intention was to offer repaired second-life washing machines and dishwashers to socially deprived households and to service and repair these devices exclusively. But the initiative was so well received by the citizens of Vienna, that they soon started lining up in front of the repair shop with their vacuum cleaners, TVs, hairdryers and other appliances that they had stored in their garages and attics. They all appreciated the unique offer of having electronic and electrical appliances of all kinds repaired at reasonable prices and the R.U.S.Z team was more than happy to meet this demand.

Coming from a public environmental counselling agency (Umweltberatung Wien) which he had initiated in 1988, R.U.S.Z founder and CEO Sepp Eisenriegler had put the focus on prolonging the lives of electrical and electronic appliances and thereby conserving resources and reducing the e-waste of private households. The support of the previously mentioned institutions allowed R.U.S.Z to operate at prices below the market price. Therefore, R.U.S.Z not only created job opportunities for the long-term unemployed, but also offered repair services for those who would not have been able to afford it otherwise. The latter would have been forced to throw away possibly repairable devices, and in exchange they would have probably chosen a new and affordable, but low-quality device of short durability, hereby creating more waste of resources and e-waste in the near future.

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<sup>1</sup>In Austria, a social economy enterprise is a project commissioned by the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS) that serves the purpose of taking over outsourced AMS duties and responsibilities by offering trainings to people at risk at the labour market aiming at reintegrating them into regular jobs. Social economy enterprises are an important instrument of active labour market policy in Austria.