

# De-growth: an electoral stake?\*

SERGE LATOUCHE

*“The insertion of the ecological component in a radical democratic political project is essential. And it is all the more imperative as the questioning of the values and trends of present society, implied by such a project, is inseparable from the critique of the imaginary of “development” on which we live”.*

Castoriadis<sup>[1]</sup>

The de-growth theme in a few months achieved a remarkable political and media breakthrough. It became (of course) an object of debate among the Greens<sup>[2]</sup>, in the farmers’ confederation<sup>[3]</sup> (something not very surprising), within the “alternative world”<sup>[4]</sup> movement, and even within the public at large. De-growth was invoked in the Italian electoral debate on the occasion of the last national elections, (by the Greens, again, becoming an object of frictions between Rifondazione and the other parties of the anti-Berlusconi coalition)<sup>[5]</sup>. It is also at the centre of growing local and regional disputes on “big projects”: the TGV Lyon-Turin with its monstrous tunnel, the Mégapont on the strait of Messine, the Mosé in the lagoon of Venice, the incinerators (in Trento and elsewhere), the coal-fired electrical centre of Civitavecchia, etc. Just about everywhere in France and Italy, de-growth groups are formed spontaneously; they organize marches, set up networks. The launching of the review “La décroissance”, after its Italian counterpart, “La decrescità”, has well contributed to the promotion of the topic<sup>[6]</sup>.

De-growth seems to renovate the old formula of ecologists: think globally, act locally.

## I. Think globally: The utopia of de-growth

The appearance of this “UFO” in the political microcosm put the media in turmoil. Newspapers, radios, and even TVs joined in. Many were determined for or against, without being well informed and most often by distorting the rare analyses available.

In the first place, de-growth is simply a banner under which gather together those who proceeded towards a radical criticism of development<sup>[7]</sup> and want now to outline an alternative project for a post-development politics<sup>[8]</sup>. De-growth is about a proposal necessary to reopen the area of inventiveness and creativity of an imaginary blocked up by the totalitarianism of economism, developmentalism and progressivism.

The project of de-growth is therefore a political project, in the strongest sense of the term,

that of the construction, in the North as well as in the South, of convivial, autonomous and economical societies. It does not come within the area of professional politicians' politicking, but aims to return all its dignity to politics.

Growth today, is not a profitable business but only on the condition that the burden and the cost to nature are passed on to future generations, the health of the consumers and the working conditions of the employees. This is why a rupture is necessary. Everyone or almost everyone agrees with it, but none dares to take the plunge. All the modern regimes have been "productivist". Republics, dictatorships, totalitarian systems, governments of the right or the left, liberal/socialist/populist/social-liberal/social democratic/centrist/radical/communist parties –all have set economic growth as an unquestionable objective. The absolutely necessary change is not, of course, one of those, which a simple election could solve by putting in place a new government or by voting for another majority. What is necessary is much more radical: a cultural revolution, neither more nor less. However, let us clarify immediately that for us, as for Castoriadis, "Revolution means neither civil war nor bloodshed...The revolution, is a change of certain central institutions of society by the activity of society itself: the explicit self-transformation of society condensed in a short time...The revolution signifies the entry of the essence of the community in a phase of *political* activity, i.e. *instituting*. The social imaginary is put at work and explicitly deals with the transformation of existing institutions".<sup>[9]</sup> The project of a de-growth society is, in this sense, eminently revolutionary. It is about quite as much a change of culture, as of the legal system and the relations of production.

For the moment, the de-growth movement has not really thought of a concrete political program, because the in-depth work of self-transformation seems more important to us than the electoral deadlines. This does not mean that delivery will be a spontaneous and painless affair. But, today's politicking lacks of a grasp of the realities which must be changed, and it is therefore advisable to be careful on how to use it. This does not mean either that the electoral stakes do not exist any more; but, at best, governments can only hold up, slow down, soften the processes of which they do not any more have a grip, if they want to go against the current. The alternative to productivism comes up at all levels: individual, local, regional, national and global, (special attention having to be taken at the European level) and we must find the most appropriate levers to act on all these levels in a concerted and complementary way.

Even if governments of the "left" adopt right-wing policies and, failing to dare the "decolonization of the imaginary", are condemned to social-liberalism, still, growth objectors, supporters of the construction of a de-growth convivial, serene and supportive society, know how to make a distinction (if it were weak) between Jospin and Chirac, Schroeder and Merkel, Prodi and Berlusconi, and even between Blair and Thatcher... When going to vote (what we advise them to do), they know that, even if no government programme takes into account the necessary decrease of our ecological footprint, they must, all the same, side themselves with the values of sharing, solidarity, equality and fraternity, rather than with those of freedom of enterprise (and freedom to exploit). These values cannot be based on the massacre of other species and the devastation of nature, and it is advisable to extend the benefit to the future generations. This is why our combat is set resolutely against globalisation and economic liberalism.

## **II. Act locally: A new way of making Politics**

Furthermore, the “de-growth” initiative inspires individual and collective attitudes such as those found among people aiming to live according to a “state of justice”, (i.e., an equitable ecological footprint), the eco-villages, the AMAP (Associations for the maintenance of an agriculture based on family farming), etc. One of the most original and promising initiatives is certainly the network of new municipalities in Italy. This is an association which proposes alternative ideas of local blossoming and good participatory practices in the rank and file, like the participatory budgets. The network includes researchers, social movements and a lot of responsible local people coming from small municipalities, but also from more important entities like the province (department) of Milan and the region of Tuscan. During the last meeting of the network, which took place in Bari in October 2005, there were 500 participants. This testifies to a reality, which is attracting all those who want to solve at the local level and in an honest way the problems generated by the absurdity of the growth society. The originality of the network consists in the choice of a strategy based on the territory, i.e., in the fact of conceiving the local as a field of interaction between social actors, physical environment and territorial heritages. As its charter says, it is about “a political project which enhances the values of the local resources and specificities, by encouraging processes of conscious and responsible autonomy and by refusing external direction (hetero-direction) from the invisible hand of the global market”.<sup>[10]</sup> The prospect offered is that in which the local is not a closed microcosm, but a linkage in a network of horizontal, virtuous and solidarity relations, aiming to experiment with practices of democratic reinforcement capable to resist the liberal domination. In other words, it is about laboratories of critical analysis and self-government for the defence of the common good.

This is in accordance with the idea of “urban village” and the route traced by the movements of “slow cities” (slow city), following those of “slow food”. It is about a world network of average-size cities, which voluntarily limit their demographic growth to 60,000 inhabitants. Beyond that limit it would become impossible to speak about “local” and “slowness”. Several authors coming from different backgrounds thus meet around the idea of “bioregions”, or regions. For Paul Aries: “This re-localization will probably go through the reinforcement of the concept of “regions” perceived as humane, social and economically relative similar units, homogeneous and based on solidarity”. It adds: “We should not only preserve the variety of regional seeds but also that of the diverse ways of being in the world”<sup>[11]</sup>.

Thus understood, politics would not be any more a technique to hold and exercise power, but it would become again the self-management of society by its members.<sup>[12]</sup> To act locally constitutes also a way of solving global impasses.

The realization of local “democratic” initiatives is more “realistic” than that of a global democracy. It is out of the question to overthrow frontally the domination of capital and the economic powers. There remains only the possibility of dissidence. This is precisely the strategy adopted by the Zapatistas and the sub-commander Marcos. The recovery or the reinvention of the “commons” (communal, common good, community space) and the self-organization of the bioregion of Chiapas, according to the analysis of Gustavo Esteva, constitutes in fact a possible illustration of a local strategy of dissidence.<sup>[13]</sup> “Facing a world ecological catastrophe, for example, we can see very well”, said Castoriadis, “authoritarian regimes imposing Draconian restrictions on a panic-stricken and apathetic population...and, if there is not a new movement, a revival of the democratic project,

“ecology” can be very well integrated into a neo-fascist ideology”<sup>[14]</sup>. The de-growth stake consists of thinking that the attraction of the convivial Utopia, combined with the weight of the constraints on change, is likely to favour a “decolonization of the imaginary” and to incite sufficient “virtuous” attitudes in favour of a reasonable solution: an ecological democracy.

To say that de-growth will be at the centre of the electoral debate in 2007 would be certainly presumptuous, but it is sure that it will not be absent. Is it also necessary as to freeze from now the movement in the form of a party of de-growth? We do not think so. To prematurely institutionalize the program of de-growth through the existence of a political party, we would risk falling into the trap of politicking, whilst the conditions are not ripe so as to hope to implement the construction of a society of de-growth it is doubtful whether it could lie effectively within the framework of the outdated nation-state<sup>[15]</sup>. To carry on with the debate, to inflect the positions of each other, to take into account certain arguments, to contribute thus in making mentalities evolve, this is our mission and our ambition at present.

---

\* This text was translated from the French manuscript and edited by members of the Editorial Committee.

---

[1] C. Castoriadis, *Une société à la dérive*, (Seuil, Paris 2005), p. 246.

[2] After the publication of my article “For a society of de-growth”, in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, (November 2003); see also *La décroissance pourquoi ?* (Vert contact 709. April 2004).

[3] Objectif décroissance : La croissance en question. Campagnes solidaires. *Mensuel de la confédération paysanne*. (N° 182. February 2004).

[4] see *Politis*, (11/12/2003), file on de-growth.

[5] Paolo Cacciari was elected on the list of Rifondazione representing Venice, after publication of a plea in favour of de-growth, *Pensare the decrescita. Sostenibilità ED equita*, (Cantieri Carta/edizioni Intra Moenia, 2006). Also, Maurizio Pallante, author of the manifesto *La decrescita Felice. La quantità della vita non dipende dal PIL*, (Editori Riuniti, Roma 2005), is an advisor of the new Green Minister for the environment.

[6] *La décroissance. Le journal de la joie de vivre*, (Casseurs, 11 place Cross-Pâquet, 69001 Lyon).

[7] See our article “To finish once and for all with development” in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (May 2001).

[8] see *Les nouveaux Cahiers de l'IUED*, n°14, « Brouillons pour l'avenir : contributions au débat sur les alternatives », (PUF, Paris/Genève 2003).

[9] Castoriadis, op cit, p. 177.

[10] cf. Carta del Nuovo Municipio in [www.nuovomunicipio.org](http://www.nuovomunicipio.org)

[11] Ariès, *Décroissance ou barbarie*, (Golias, Lyon 2005). p. 111.

[12] Takis Fotopoulos, *Vers une démocratie générale. Une démocratie directe, économique, écologique et sociale*.( Seuil, 2001), p. 15. (English edition: *Towards an Inclusive Democracy: the crisis of the Growth economy and the need for a new liberatory project* (Cassell/Continuum:

London/N.Y., 1997)

[13] Gustavo Esteva, *Celebration of Zapatismo, Multiversity and Citizens International*, (Penang, 2004). Also, by the same author with Mr. S. Prakash, *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures*, (Zed Books, 1998).

[14] Castoriadis, op cit,

[15] See our article: « Pour une renaissance du local » (*l'Écologiste* N° 15 April-May 2005) and Takis Fotopoulos, op cit.