

Direct Democracy and De-growth*

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I think that in order to give a relatively comprehensive answer —as far, of course as time restrictions allow it— to the driving question of this working group, we have to ask first some more questions and try to answer them. So, I will structure my paper in terms of four questions, which correspond also to four crucial issues relating to de-growth.

1. Is Democracy just a procedure?

At the outset, I think that the very form of the driving question for this working group, as well as the list for the other working groups and their driving questions, gives the clear impression that democracy is one particular “box” referring to the political side of de-growth, the other boxes being the economic one, the technological one, the ecological one and so on. In other words, I feel that this classification is not just taxonomic aiming at a systematic covering of the parts of a common whole, but reflects an underlying assumption that democracy is just a procedure, a good way of sorting out problems with as much participation as possible. This may also be the reason why direct democracy is confused with participatory democracy in the very title of this working group.

However, as it has been shown in the literature, democracy is not just a procedure but, instead, it is a *politeia*, i.e., “a regime aspiring to social and personal autonomy (to set your own rules)”.^[1] This means that there is only one form of democracy at the political level, that is, the direct exercise of sovereignty by the people themselves, a form of societal institution which rejects any form of “ruling” and institutionalises the equal sharing of political power among all citizens. This fact has two important implications:

a) that all other forms of so-called democracy (“representative,” “parliamentary,” etc.) are merely various forms of “oligarchy,” that is, rule by the few. Therefore, the only adjectives that are permissible to precede democracy are those which are used to extend its scope to take into account democracy at the economic, or broader social domains —as we do with the conception of Inclusive Democracy, with its four main components of Political Democracy, Economic Democracy, Democracy at the social realm and Ecological Democracy aiming at integrating society to polity, economy and Nature correspondingly;

b) that the real meaning of the arguments in favour of “deepening” democracy, in the guise of various forms of “participatory democracy,” is, at best, to give the false impression that a kind of pseudo-direct democracy, i.e. a mix of representative democracy with direct democracy, is possible, (despite the fact that they represent different types of regimes), or, at worst, to create a false image that the present regimes in the West (which have aptly been characterised as

“liberal oligarchies”), are in fact democratic.

2. Is De-growth compatible with a globalised market economy?

The issue whether de-growth is compatible with a market economy, let alone a globalised one, is both a historical and a theoretical one, in other words, it is a matter of History and study of the dynamics of the system of the market economy.

Historically, the growth economy is not just the outcome of domination of specific imaginary significations or values, but, instead, the outcome of social struggle on the one hand and technological (including organisational) and socio-economic developments on the other. Therefore, the rise of the growth economy and society, let alone the rise of bourgeois society itself, cannot simply be reduced to the emergence of the Enlightenment idea of Progress and the consequent rise of the imaginary of development. The question is: has there ever been a system of market economy, in the Polanyian sense, whose dynamic had not led to maximisation of economic growth —barring the periods of unwanted economic crises like the present one— whether this was a capitalist market economy, or even a “socialist” market economy like the one in today’s China? If the answer is negative —as it should be— then this is a strong indication that de-growth could not be seen as just a matter of changing values and imaginary significations, or of “abandoning a faith system, a religion”^[2], and that, instead, de-growth is simply non-feasible within a system of market economy.

Theoretically, it can be shown that, on the production side, the dynamics of the market economy lead to a constant expansion of production, for efficiency and profits to be maximised.^[3] Also, on the consumption side, it is well known that for most people the rationale of the market and growth economy is their offspring: the consumer society. It is, therefore, obvious that a degrowing market-based economy and society is non-feasible not only because de-growth deprives it from its basic dynamics on the production side, but also because it deprives it from its justification in the eyes of citizens, who, today, have been transformed into consumers.

So, a degrowing system of market economy is a contradiction in terms, particularly so in the present globalised economy. Not only because the present main actors in the internationalised market economy, the Transnational Corporations (TNCs), will never accept in practice the downscaling of the economy and would simply move to other areas, in case some countries in the North (or even an entire economic bloc like the EU), attempted to adopt a de-growth policy, but also, because the system of market economy is simply incompatible with a degrowing system. This means that neither the concentration of economic power nor the ecological implications of the growth economy are avoidable within the present institutional framework of the internationalised market economy.

At the strategic level, this implies that the growth economy could not be transcended through a program of reforms, like the ones suggested by the de-growth project, or even through radical decentralisation within the market economy institutional framework —whether this is effected through eco-villages, or urban villages and similar institutions— which take for granted the system of market economy. However, de-growth is perfectly compatible with a new kind of economy and society beyond the present internationalised market economy, like the ones envisaged by the Inclusive Democracy project. And this leads us to the next question.

3. What is the relationship between an Inclusive Democracy and De-growth?

It can be shown that de-growth is, in a sense, a by-product of an Inclusive Democracy. By Inclusive Democracy is meant the set of structures and relations, and the corresponding values, which is based on:

- a) *Political (direct) Democracy*, where all political decisions (including those relating to the formation and implementation of laws) are taken by the citizen body collectively and without representation;
- b) *Economic Democracy*, in the sense of an economy where all production decisions —*what, how and for whom* to produce— as well as consumption decisions are taken either by the body of citizens collectively, or by citizens individually, in an economy where the economic resources are collectively owned and controlled by the *demos*, the citizen body, in a highly decentralised society consisting of a confederation of self-reliant Inclusive Democracies;
- c) *Democracy in the social realm*, in the sense of self-determination in work, education, etc. and,
- d) *Ecological Democracy*, in the sense of a society which is re-integrated with Nature, in the context of which a growth economy and consumerism are things of the past. It can be shown that every single component of an Inclusive Democracy leads to an ecological democracy.

Thus, at the political level, there are grounds for believing that the creation of a public space will by itself have a very significant effect in reducing the appeal of materialism. This is because the public space will provide a new meaning of life to fill the existential void that the present consumer society creates.^[4]

At the economic level, it is not accidental that, historically, the process of destroying the environment en masse has coincided with the process of marketisation of the economy, which began about two centuries ago. In other words, the emergence of the market economy and of the consequent growth economy had crucial repercussions on the society-Nature relationship and led to the rise of the growth ideology as the dominant social paradigm. Thus, an “instrumentalist” view of Nature became dominant, in which Nature was seen as an instrument for growth, within a process of endless concentration of power. If we assume that only a confederal society could secure an inclusive democracy today, it would be reasonable to assume further that once the market economy is replaced by a democratically run confederal economy, the grow-or-die dynamics of the former will be replaced by the new social dynamic of the latter: a dynamic aiming at the satisfaction of *demos’* needs and not at growth per se. If the satisfaction of demotic needs does not depend, as at present, on the continuous expansion of production to cover the “needs” that the market creates, and if the link between economy and society is restored, then there is no reason why the present instrumentalist view of Nature will continue conditioning human behaviour.

Also, democracy in the broader social realm could be reasonably expected to be

environmentally friendly. The phasing out of patriarchal relations in the household and hierarchical relations in general should create a new ethos of non-domination, which would engulf both First Nature and Second Nature. In other words, the creation of democratic conditions in the social realm should be a decisive step in the creation of the sufficient condition for a harmonious nature-society relationship.

Last but not least, the “localist” character of a confederal Inclusive Democracy might also be expected to enhance its environmentally friendly character. Local control makes collective management of the commons more effective because of the higher visibility of the commons resources and behaviour toward them, feedback on the effect of regulations, etc. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume —and the evidence about the remarkable success of local communities in safeguarding their environments is overwhelming^[5]— that when people rely directly on their natural surroundings for their livelihood, they will develop an intimate knowledge of those surroundings, which will necessarily affect positively their behaviour towards them. However, the precondition for local control of the environment to be successful is that the *demos* depends on its natural surroundings for its long-term livelihood and that it therefore has a direct interest in protecting it —another reason why an ecological society is impossible without economic democracy. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the very economic effectiveness of the renewable forms of energy (solar, wind, etc.) depends crucially on the organisation of social and economic life in smaller units.

4. How to move from here to there?

On the basis of what was said before it is clear that moving to an ecological democracy and de-growth is not just a matter of “a paradigm shift to a concept of “right-sizing” the global and national economies”^[6], or just a change in culture in the form of a cultural revolution, or a change in the legal system, etc. A change in culture at a significant social scale is impossible within the present institutional framework of a market economy and its political complement of representative democracy because the institutions themselves, and the way of living implied by them, have created a corresponding kind of culture. Such a change in culture at a significant social scale can only take place within the context of a new political strategy that comprises the gradual involvement of increasing numbers of people in a new kind of politics and the parallel shifting of economic resources (labour, capital, land) away from the market economy. The aim of such a transitional strategy should be to create changes in the institutional framework and value systems that, after a period of tension between the new institutions and the old ones, would, at some stage, replace the market economy, statist democracy, as well as the social paradigm “justifying” them, with an inclusive democracy and a new democratic paradigm respectively.^[7]

This means that activities like Community Economic Development projects, self-managed factories, housing associations, LETS schemes, communes, self-managed farms and so on cannot lead, by themselves, to radical social change. However, the same activities are necessary and desirable parts of a comprehensive political strategy for systemic change, where contesting local elections represents the culmination of grassroots action. This is because contesting local elections does provide the most effective means to massively publicise a programme for an inclusive democracy, as well as the opportunity to initiate its immediate implementation on a significant social scale. In other words, contesting local elections is not just an educational exercise but also an expression of the belief that it is only

at the local level that direct and economic democracy can be founded today. Therefore, participation in local elections is also a strategy to gain power, in order to dismantle it immediately, by substituting the decision-taking role of the assemblies for that of the local authorities, the day after the election is won. Finally, contesting local elections gives the chance to start changing society from below, which is the only democratic strategy, as against the statist approaches, which aim to change society from above through the conquest of state power, and the “civil society” approaches, which do not aim to a systemic change at all. It is because the *demos* is the fundamental social and economic unit of a future democratic society that we have to start from the local level to change society, although of course local inclusive democracies have to be confederated to ensure the transition to a confederal inclusive democracy.

The immediate objective should therefore be the creation, from below, of “popular bases of political and economic power,” that is, the establishment of local public realms of direct and economic democracy which, at some stage, will confederate in order to create the conditions for the establishment of a new society. Thus, once the institutions of inclusive democracy begin to be installed, and people, for the first time in their lives, start obtaining real power to determine their own fate, then the gradual erosion of the dominant social paradigm and of the present institutional framework will be set in motion. A new popular power base will be created. Town by town, city by city, region by region will be taken away from the effective control of the market economy and statist forms of organisation (national or transnational), their political and economic structures being replaced by the confederations of democratically run communities.

To sum it up. Act locally; Aim globally.

* The above text was used as a “stirring” paper by the working group entitled “Participative/direct democracy” in the Second Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity (Barcelona, March 26-29, 2010): http://www.degrowth.eu/v1/uploads/media/Fotopoulos-democracy_en.pdf

[1] Cornelius Castoriadis, “La démocratie comme procédure et comme régime,” *La montée de l’insignifiance* (Seuil, Paris, 1996), pp. 221-241.

[2] Serge Latouche, “Why Less Should Be So Much More: De-growth Economics,” *Le Monde diplomatique* (December 2004).

[3] Takis Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy* (Cassell/Taylor & Francis, 1997), ch. 1; translated in French, German, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Chinese; see also *The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy* (IJID, 2005), chs. 1-5 : <http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/journal/ss/ss.htm>

[4] Kerry H. Whiteside, “Hannah Arendt and Ecological Politics,” *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Winter 1994), p. 355.

[5] see e.g. *The Ecologist*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (July-August 1992).

[6] Declaration of the Paris 2008 De-Growth Conference : <http://www.degrowth.eu/v1/index.php?id=56>

[7] T. Fotopoulos, "Transitional strategies and the Inclusive Democracy project," *Democracy & Nature: The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2002): http://www.democracynature.org/vol8/takis_transitional.htm