

Carnegie's Ghosts

Degrowth: Putting the economy back in its place

In France, where the concept originated and where it has had considerable impact, it is *decroissance*; in English it is *degrowth*, and in any language it is a significant symbolic challenge to the “tyranny of growth.”

Degrowth activists in France have formed a political party, and publish a monthly magazine; sadly for English speakers such as myself, this French language material remains largely inaccessible. Fortunately, a very useful summary of the politics of degrowth has been provided by Valerie Fournier in a paper currently available [here](#).

Here I'll pick up on some of the points that caught my attention.

Interestingly, from a green perspective, Fournier explains how “degrowth is not presented as an ecological imperative” and is not viewed as a “‘forced option’ in the face of catastrophic environmental crisis” (pp.535-536). In other words, it is adopted as a conscious choice. This standpoint neatly evades the apocalyptic visions of some green propaganda and also avoids the nightmare of eco-authoritarianism, since conscious and deliberate choice means democracy. Furthermore, if the move to degrowth is made openly, freely and democratically, and is not forced by scarcity or austerity, it stems from a desire to reorder priorities: well-being rather than growth; quality of life rather than consumption.

Another important issue for degrowth proponents is citizenship. As a political concept, citizenship implies the existence of a collective that all citizens belong to and “takes us away from the self-interested motives of the consumer”. This raises the actions of the ‘green consumer’ who may be engaged in “no more than individual lifestyle decisions and actions (eg to recycle, buy green products) into a wider political domain” (p.537).

Overall, framing crucial economic issues in terms of the themes of democracy and citizenship is not so much a critique of growth as a critique of the ideology of growth. It is a call to challenge economic determinism, and to “question the ‘hardness’, ‘fact-ness’ or supposed inevitability of economic ‘realities’ such as the market, work or value” (p.534). It is a demand to “put the economy back in its place” (p.533) as a socio-political construct. Degrowth begins not from the economy but from values and politics.

And though the term ‘degrowth’ may have negative connotations, Fournier writes that “it presents the advantage of not being easily recuperated by capitalism” in the way that the idea of sustainability has been captured and eviscerated. As she says, paraphrasing an article by George Monbiot rather neatly, “supermarkets may try to sell us ‘green’ or ‘ethical’ but one thing that supermarkets or capitalism more generally cannot sell us is ‘less’ ” (p.532). Thus degrowth activists promote Buy Nothing Day and the broader idea of consumption strikes.

The degrowth analysis clearly accords with much in green thinking but there some interesting points of debate. In particular, it follows from degrowth’s emphasis on democratic choice, citizenship and human priorities, as Fournier explains, that human and social values are privileged above ecological ones; degrowth is humanist before it is ecologist (p.536). I would suggest, therefore, that as well as challenging the ideology of growth, degrowth also carries a challenge to the ecocentric ‘deep greens’ of the environmental movement.

At the same time, degrowth ideas provide much valuable sustenance for the often-beleaguered humanist ‘red-greens,’ with a developing analysis that grows from a solid set of values and principles.

Source

Valerie Fournier (2008) Escaping from the economy: the politics of degrowth *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 28(11/12), 528-545.

Other readings (in English)

Joan Martinez Alier (2009) Socially sustainable economic degrowth (pdf here)

Conference on economic de-growth for ecological sustainability and social equity (2008)
Declaration (pdf here); Conference proceedings (here)

Serge Latouche (2007) Degrowth, an electoral stake (here)

Serge Latouche (2004) Why less should be so much more: Degrowth economics (here)

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BLOGS ABOUT: GROWTH CRITIQUE

<http://en.wordpress.com/tag/growth-critique/>

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