

Degrowth and the domination of nature

(long abstract)

Main scope of the paper

The degrowth movement tends to embrace the idea that an ontology of nature which presupposes a strict divide between subject (the human being) and object (the environment) is no longer tenable. However, if we get a closer look to the concrete political proposals how to consider nature and social justice, we can notice that degrowth theorists remain concerned mainly with problems which put at risk *human* interests, of present or future generations and do not see the entanglements of exploitation which link injustice to humans with the injustice to other living beings, in particular to nonhuman animals.

In this paper I claim that precisely because degrowth has developed as an attempt to put the battle for a new understanding of nature in more radical terms than the current environmental movement, which remain largely entrapped in the idea of 'ecological modernization' assimilated by democratic consumer capitalism, it can't no longer remain blind to the connections between exploitation of different beings. Therefore I argue for integrating an antispeciesist dimension into degrowth, which elaborates the need to overcome the oppression of nonhuman animals on which large parts of our society are based: Since justice is based on empathy and respect, the consideration of suffering in all its forms has to become integral part of the degrowth ontology of nature.

Concepts of nature in degrowth

Degrowth as a concept appeared for the first time in the Seventies in France (cf. a.o. Georgescu-Roegen 1979) as a reflection on the 'limits of growth'-report by the Club of Rome (1972) and with the necessity of articulating alternative model(s) of production and distribution. The raise of a progressive consciousness of the importance of environment's protection in connection with the publication of data regarding main problems like oil depletion, pollution and threat to biodiversity in the late Sixties and Seventies represented the fertile soil for the emergence of the field of ecological economics, which is indicated as one of the importance reference point for the degrowth movement (Boulding, 1966; Odum, 1971). Ecological economics contested the isolation of economic science from broader social issues and refused the 'substitution optimism' towards natural resources through social (human) resources that was typical of the mainstream economic approach. Introducing the notion that irreversible evolutions (of ecosystems) are possible, as well as postulating the absence of a direct relation between the dose and the response, ecological economics opposed the idea that an indefinite growth is possible.

Another source of inspiration for degrowth theorists is the concept of socio-nature developed in historical-geographical materialism, which contests at its core the divide between the human being and the environment, being founded on the idea that living organisms, including humans, need to transform 'nature' and that, through that, both humans and 'nature' are changed (Harvey, 1996). Already in the Nineties Latouche (1995) the modern view, of the human being as

the master and owner of nature which has had the function of neglecting the conflicts among human beings (for natural resources). He called for assuming anew a pre-Aristotelian attitude, based not only on the idea of harmony between the human being and nature but also on an overcoming of a deep ontological divide between the two.

Leading to an approach which sees environment as common good (*res communis*), degrowth implies an integration of humans in nature, and therefore promote a change in political strategies, which should be no longer impinged on the idea of "saving the environment" as something separated from us, but rather on the acknowledgement of the profound unity of all living organisms and on the fact that decisions depend on ways in which we want to live and organized the process of change.

Antispeciesism, social justice and degrowth

Despite the fact that a reflection on nature has been an important topic through the history of degrowth ideas, until now degrowth has largely avoid to engage in a deep reflection on conceptualizing social justice also for beings other than humans. The construction of 'others' has served as a powerful tool in the history of ideas to establish hierarchical scales as tools of governance and thus to reinforce discrimination, in different times through the categories of rationality, masculinity, 'race', healthiness and youthness. Nowadays the need to ground social justice on attempts to include differences and to stimulate a culture of respect for the diversity is recognized as important, also by the degrowth movement (cf. Muraca, 2012; Demaria et al., 2013): The category which seems to be at hardest to be overcome remains the centrality of the human being, thus anthropocentrism: the distance the human being has put himself to the animal has served as a psychological and social instrument to affirm his dominion over those categories of human beings, and over nonhumans and thus nature.

Antispeciesism has to be conceived of as a philosophy which transcends explicit efforts at the liberation of nonhuman animals from oppression. The term has been coined in opposition to speciecism, a concept that emerged in the 1970s to indicate the discrimination of beings on the basis of their species membership. At the theoretical level, speciecism can be defined as 'the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more particular species' (Horta 2010, p. 248). Speciecism is also an ideology, namely a set of shared beliefs that legitimate the oppression of beings not belonging to the human species (cf. Nibert, 2002). While non-speciecism indicates the mere absence of speciecism, antispeciesism presupposes an active opposition to speciecism, and thus a stance against specieist forms of discrimination. Therefore, antispeciesism contains in its essence a different concept of obligations and rights than other (specieist) systems, and thus a different concept of social justice.

Precisely because the degrowth movement criticizes capitalism and its myth of growth as indefinite exploitation of Earth's resources, it cannot promote an alternative vision inspired by fairness towards the Earth ignoring the exploitation of nonhuman animals in current socioeconomic system, an enormous phenomenon both in quantitative terms of deaths as well as in qualitative terms of suffering produced. There can be no overcoming of the growth paradigm

(viewed as a paradigm for consumption based on unjust distribution of resources) as long as a general and comprehensive critique of all forms of exploitation is lacking. Fairness and justice cannot exist in a system structured around exploitation of the majority of sentient beings.

Quoted Literature

Bouldings, K. E. (1966): 'The Economy of the Coming Spaceship Earth', in Jaret (ed). H. *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy*, Baltimore: 3-14.

Demaria, F. et al. (2013): 'What is degrowth? From an activist slogan to a social movement', *Environmental Values* 22 (2): 191-215.

Georgescu-Rögen (1979): *La décroissance.*, Lausanne.

Harvey, D. (1996): *Nature, Justice and the Geography of Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Horta, H. (2010): What is Speciecism?, *The Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 23: 243-266,

Latouche, S. (1995): *La mégamachine. Raison technoscientifique, raison économique et mythe du progrès : essais à la mémoire de Jacques Ellul*. Paris.

Muraca, B. (2012): 'Towards a Fair Degrowth-society: Justice and the Right to a 'Good Life' Beyond Growth', *Futures* 44: 535-545

Nibert, D. (2002): *Animal Rights. Human Rights. Entanglements of Oppression and Liberation.*, Lanham.

Oudum, H. T. (1971): *Environment, Power, and Society*, New York: Wiley-Interscience.