

Proposal for a short paper presentation at the Fourth International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity, 2-6 September 2014 in Leipzig, Germany

Proposed title: Reflections on 'society' and 'space' in the degrowth debate

Keywords: society-space relations, geography

Short abstract

The degrowth debate is primarily concerned with the impossibility of reconciling sustainability and economic growth. Another, less explicit layer of this debate deals with the relation between society and space. While this is a genuinely geographical problem, geographical contributions to the degrowth debate have been sparse thus far. The presentation will offer a geographical perspective on the visions of society-nature relationships put forth in the degrowth debate and contends that these visions conform neither to the traditional, nor to the late-modern forms of society-space relations. Instead, degrowth visions may offer a 'third way' of relating society to space. Analysing and theoretically elaborating on this potentially new *modus operandi* promises to be insightful for geography and degrowth scholars alike.

Long abstract

The degrowth debate highlights the apparently irreconcilable conflict between the goals of sustainability and economic growth in industrial capitalist societies of the global North. In so doing, the degrowth debate raises important questions about the kind of societal organisation, the form of democratic processes and the role and nature of capitalism, and what these mean for the use, consumption and appropriation of natural resources. The discussion is primarily concerned with the kind of society we want to live in, the factors that constitute a 'good life' and the institutional and individual changes necessary to make the transition to an ecologically sustainable and socially equitable form of societal organisation. Beneath this layer of the debate, there is a second and less explicit one which is concerned with the way society and space relate to each other. This second layer shines through, for example, where a small(er)-scale societal organisation is recommended or where the potentials and pitfalls of economic and other forms of globalization are discussed. Such questions about society-space relations are genuinely geographical problems. Curiously, the degrowth debate has thus far garnered little attention among academic geography, while economists, philosophers, sociologists and others have contributed many valuable insights.

The presentation aims to help fill this gap by providing a geographical perspective on the society-space relations conceived in the degrowth debate. This involves: first, reflecting on the notions of 'society' and 'space' that are implicitly and explicitly put forth in the debate; and second, offering a systematization of how 'society' and 'space' are put into a relation in degrowth narratives. It is suggested that some of the prevalent leitmotifs with geographical reference in degrowth narratives are (i) the embeddedness of individuals and society in an ecological/bio-physical context, (ii) the Janus-faced character of globalisation and (iii) the nexus of 'ecological space' and culture.

The analysis highlights that the degrowth movements's quest for appropriate norms that would help facilitate a sustainable, just and equitable societal organisation and a 'good life' for all makes recourse to ecological or bio-physical as well as spatial criteria; for example, where it is argued that the existence of bio-physical limits necessitates a small-scale, self-sufficient form of societal organisation. In this example, a factor that is external to society is used to justify the preference for a particular kind of societal organisation along with specific spatial relations of this society. Such ways of relating 'society' and 'space' may prove problematic; they may lead to tensions where specific forms of *social* organisation are justified by making recourse to *bio-physical* concepts.

A concern with society-space relations is also evident in degrowth discussions that relate to economic and other forms of globalisation. The scholarly work on degrowth provides rich discussion of the nature of economic globalisation and the role of capitalism, the options of cultural globalisation and the possibilities arising from global alliances between degrowth and, for example, environmental justice movements. Based on this variety of society-space relations articulated in the degrowth debate it is hypothesised that these visions conform neither to the traditional forms of society-space relations (small communities with short geographical reach that are entirely reliant on face-to-face contact), nor to the late-modern forms of society-space relations (communication and action are to a large extent digitally mediated and not dependent on face-to-face contact and the bodily co-presence of actors). Instead, degrowth visions may offer a 'third way' of relating society to space. Analysing and theoretically elaborating on this potentially new modus operandi promises to be insightful for geography and degrowth scholars alike.