

DEGROWTH AND THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

Summary: The paper aims at constructively criticize Degrowth's excessive reliance on the physical limits to growth as a discursive tool to undermine the exclusively growth-oriented attitude of mainstream economics. By recuperating the critique of political economy, the paper investigates the shift in the value/nature relationship which has occurred since the environmental crisis has emerged as a fully political problem. Originally perceived as a *crisis of capitalism* (the industry-caused crossing of the immutable threshold represented by the physical limits of the planet), ecological deterioration ended up being considered as a *crisis for capitalism*, as yet another plug in the astonishing mosaic of creative destruction. This apparently perfect translation of the environment into the homogeneous grammar of money is the main character of the green economy. The basic argument sustained by the paper is that once the physical limits to growth have been reconfigured as drivers for growth, a political strategy which relies too strongly on them will end up strategically disempowered.

Keywords: Degrowth, Critique of Political Economy, Green Economy, Value/Nature Link, Physical Limits to Growth.

Narrative Step I Want to Address: Visions or Strategies for Transformation

In recent years, a new social movement called *Degrowth* (*décroissance* in French, *decrecimiento* in Spanish) has appeared on the European radical scene. Politically, the Degrowth movement is based on anti-consumerism (since over-consumption is regarded as the root-cause of social inequalities), whereas economically it is based on ecological economics (since the reduction of *throughput* – the quantity of matter and energy which traverses the productive sphere – is considered to be the most viable solution to most environmental issues). From my perspective, the crucial element of Degrowth is the assumption that reducing consumption does not entail a sacrificial renouncement to wealth and comfortable lifestyles. Rather, it requires a sort of paradigm shift in terms of mindset: in order to maximize well-being, economic activities should be re-thought in non-consumptive ways (e.g. sharing work, consuming communally, privileging non-tangible values over cheap commodities, etc.).

Degrowth represents a suitable key to understand alternative economics since it

is based on a call to creatively think beyond the limits of profit-making, or to decolonize our social imaginary: here the contradiction between the *economic* value actually extracted from the commodity form and the *social* value potentially embodied in labor *sans phrase* emerges in all its disruptive force. In other words, Degrowth possesses a twofold nature: a *critical* one, which unmasks the putative indisputability of an economic system ultimately reliant on human and environmental exploitation; and a *prefigurative* one, in which alternative ways of wealth production are experimented to show the possibility of a different system of economic production.

However, the theory of Degrowth also presents problematic shortcomings: for example, the insistence on the physical limits to growth as the crucial reason why Degrowth should be undertaken seems to establish an either/or structure which logically undermines the emphasis on the *desirability* of a less impactful organization of production. My hypothesis is that such reliance on the physical limits to growth can be more clearly understood by accounting for the profound shift undergone by ecological policies from the 1990s onwards. Whereas in the late 1960s – when the environmental crisis appeared as a fully political issue – its management used to be seen as a costly but unproductive necessity, in more recent years the corporate community has elaborated and eventually imposed a new mindset according to which ecological criticality is to be approached as a profitable business opportunity rather than an unavoidable nuisance. The trajectory that connects the notion of *sustainable development* (emerged in the late 1980s) and its contemporary, more radical form – namely the *green economy* (popularized in the course of 2000s) – is nothing else than a chapter in the history of neoliberalism as a progressively hegemonic governmental rationality.

Originally perceived as a *crisis of capitalism* (the industry-caused crossing of the immutable threshold represented by the physical limits of the planet), ecological deterioration ended up being considered as a *crisis for capitalism*, as yet another plug in the astonishing mosaic of creative destruction. This apparently perfect translation of the environment into the homogeneous grammar of money is the main character of the green economy. Moreover, its total acceptance on the part of the UN explains the sidereal distance that separates supporters and detractors of the *financialisation of nature*. To realise how profound is the adherence of the UN to the green economy dogma (“the market will solve the problem it has itself created in the first place”) we can report two articles of *The Future We Want*:

58. We affirm that green economy policies in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication should: [...] (d) Promote sustained and inclusive economic growth [...] (h) Not

constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade, avoid unilateral actions to deal with environmental challenges outside the jurisdiction of the importing country [...] 61. We recognise that urgent action on unsustainable patterns of production and consumption where they occur remains fundamental in addressing environmental sustainability and promoting conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems, regeneration of natural resources and the promotion of sustained, inclusive and equitable global growth (UN 2012: 10-12).

Three are the points I want to highlight from this passage: a) the imperative of economic growth is never contested – actually, not even questioned; b) the green economy is the new frontier of free trade agreements and, as such, is not going to establish tense relationships with them; c) the urgency and gravity of the environmental crisis is assessed only in so far as the solution to it is configured as market-based and growth-ensuring. As we see, the notion of green economy entails a new relation between the capitalist mode of production (more specifically: its mechanisms of valorisation/exploitation) and nature (more specifically: its peculiar role within the process of value production).

In very general terms, the paper aims at shedding new light on this unprecedented relation between capital and nature from the perspective of Degrowth. In particular, I would like to avoid the double trap of an excessive emphasis on physical limits to growth (essential *incompatibility* between capital and the environment) and an unproblematic trust in the green economy (essential *affinity* between capital and the environment). In fact, despite their diametrical political opposition, these two positions hypostatize the terms of the relationship instead of investigating their mutual and reciprocal constitution. My goal, instead, is to focus on the historicity – and, hence, intrinsic transformability – of the configurations of such relation. In other words, we are interested in investigating the different modalities through which the two terms have been interacting and have created at least two different *socio-natural links*, which I shall call “liberal” and “neoliberal”.

The basic argument I advance is that once the physical limits to growth have been reconfigured as drivers for growth, a political strategy which relies too strongly on them will end up strategically disempowered. Otherwise put, the essential constructivism of the green economy should not be rejected but rather reversed and put to the service of socio-ecological experimentation whose desirability is in itself the environmental dimension of contemporary anti-capitalism.

