

4th DEGROWTH CONFERENCE

Short paper session

Thematic thread: Living conviviality

Topic: Alternative welfare models: happiness, needs and the good life

Title:

THE RELEASE OF 'FREE' TIME? – DEGROWTH AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE COLONIZATION OF TIME BY THE LOGIC OF CAPITALISM

This paper presents a theoretical study in Psychology on the subject of time in contemporary capitalist societies and in a hypothetical degrowth society. It describes the logic that rules the structuring of time in capitalist societies as well as the one that would rule the social and subjective experiences of time in a degrowth society. Considering that the contemporary lifestyle and the acceleration of time (and the lack of time itself) have led to a general sense of dissatisfaction and even to diseases, it would be relevant to question what changes in the structure of social time could possibly result from a shift of model of society as Degrowth theoreticians propose. Considering that a degrowth society should rest upon radically different principles than those on which capitalist societies lie, significant changes on the issue of lifestyle as a whole are to be expected, especially when taking into account that economic growth would no longer be the cornerstone of social metabolism in a post-growth society.

The core hypothesis of this work is that it is not possible to speak of *free* time in capitalism, since the imperative of economic growth causes the logic of production (which should be restricted to the work time) to spread through every sphere of the individuals' life, including the one in which they should be free of any economic imperative (the so-called "free time"). On the other hand, as Degrowth supports a model of society where the main values are not those of economy, but human values (and so displacing economic growth from its central position), it may be imagined that in such

society individuals could actually experience free time, and also that the (re)emergence of idleness would be viable.

The referred work was based on the assumption that the way time is experienced may vary from one society to another, according to its production system, to its culture, dominant religion, and so on. In other words, the experience and the meaning of time are socially constructed. Therefore we must assume that such an experience in capitalist societies is narrowly related to their structure and rationality. That also implies that a shift in our societal model (i.e. a transition to a degrowth society) should also lead to a shift in the experience and meaning of time.

The capitalist signification of time can be synthesized in Benjamin Franklin's notorious sentence "*Time is money*". In fact, that statement remains true until the present days. Along the 20th century, the development of capitalism has brought about significant changes either in the way individuals deal with concrete and symbolic goods, with other individuals and with themselves as well as with time. The manufacturing of goods in a continuously rising scale implies an ever-growing counterpart in consumption. That has not only led to the emergence of leisure as a whole new industry (whose main goal is, of course, profit), but also to the rise of publicity and to the deriving association of consumption to a leisure activity. In order to keep the system running, people should be convinced to buy what they didn't need – while believing they did.

During the past few decades, we have witnessed the development and spreading of new (mainly internet-based) technologies which have allowed people to work not only in their homes, but basically anywhere. Thus time and space are no longer barriers for work: one can work at any time, anywhere. The boundaries between work time and free time are now blurred, but not because work has become an activity so meaningful that such division would no longer make sense (as Marx would profess); instead, it's the logic of an alienated work (which services economic growth) that is invading free time, leaving little or no room for personal development, as it is now a foreign logic that rules the time that should be free for the individuals to use it as they pleased. If a supposedly free time is determined by an external logic, it cannot be considered free. Additionally, in capitalist societies as a whole there is an exceedingly long work journey, as well as an increasingly accelerated rhythm of life due to the high levels of production and consumption capitalism demands in order to keep running. Individuals in these societies

dedicate most of their time not to themselves, but to the maintenance of a bankrupt economic system, whether they are aware of that or not. In a society in which time is money – and now also very scarce – there can be no room for creative thought, ludic activities and idleness, for no time can be “wasted”, and anything that does not result in a production of economic values is considered to be a waste of time.

Today we experience not only an ecologic crisis and an economic crisis, but also a crisis of values and lifestyle. All these crises ultimately have a common denominator, namely economic growth. That means that Degrowth, as opposed to the logic of capitalism, also represents an opportunity for a shift in our values and lifestyle, and therefore in the structuring and signification of time. The point to which many proponents of Degrowth and of other post-growth proposals converge regarding time is the reduction of work hours. That would be, in itself, not only desirable, but also a consequence of the rupture with the logic of growth. A natural consequence of that would be the expansion of the free time, as well as the deceleration of the rhythms of life. Another relevant consequence is that without the referred logic as a ruler of social metabolism, free time should not be colonized by activities that, in one way or another, are related either to consumption or to production. Thus the lack of an external determiner would leave individuals the opportunity of a more autonomous choice as to *if* and *how* to fill their – now – *free* time, allowing a more personally significant fulfillment of one’s own time, and therefore contributing to the emancipation of the individuals.

Latouche himself holds that a degrowth society must restore the suppressed dimensions of life, among which he includes the pleasure of artistic activities, the time for contemplation, musing, conversation, and the joy of being alive. According to him, we must learn from the wisdom of past times, enjoying slowness and appreciating our territory. In this context, we could include idleness not only as something desirable, but also possible. If free time (and time as whole) is now released from the statement that time is money, one’s allowed to “waste” time. Idleness is most assuredly not a waste of time, but it requires that time is not counted, measured, and that it’s not a concern – precisely the opposite of a logic according to which all time available must be oriented to production.

As we see, the logic of economic growth is the very artifice of the present temporal scenario. We then come to the conclusion that the release of free time depends on the

release from the fallacy of incessant economic growth. Therefore, as authors like V. Padilha and R. Antunes hold, an actually *free* time is only possible outside of capitalism. And Degrowth, for the reasons presented earlier appears to be the most accurate proposal to remodel our temporal scenario. Degrowth, as a new “draft” of social organization may, indeed, bestow a new meaning on work and free time, allowing individuals to carry out their own aptitudes, so their activities would be more meaningful and they could have a more fulfilling life.

This paper thus aims to contribute with Degrowth mainly on the subject of time and human emancipation, considering that free time and idleness remain as fairly unexplored topics by theoreticians of Degrowth. Furthermore this study should endorse the assumption that *free* time is only possible outside capitalism – and could be a reality in a degrowth society. That alone supports and strengthens the core thesis of Degrowth, namely, that economic growth is not the solution, but usually the problem itself.