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Degrowth: A Slogan for a New Ecological Democracy

Interview with Serge Latouche

by Federico Paolini

Serge Latouche, Professor Emeritus of Economic Science at the University of Paris-Sud, is one of the principal exponents of the anti-utilitarian movement (MAUSS), which argues that there is an urgent need to go beyond the economicism characterizing modern societies to achieve an in-depth renovation of society centered on environmental sustainability, the equal distribution of resources, and solidarity. The “Mouvement Anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales” publishes the journal *La Revue du Mauss*, of which Latouche is one of the most active editors.

Latouche has published many books, including: *L'occidentalisation du monde: essai sur la signification, la portée et les limites de l'uniformisation planétaire*, 1989; *La planète des naufragés: essai sur l'après-développement*, 1991; *La mégamachine: raison technoscientifique, raison économique et mythe du progrès. Essais à la mémoire de Jacques Ellul*, 1995; *La défi de Minerve. Rationalité occidentale et raison méditerranéenne*, 1999; *Survivre au développement: de la décolonisation de l'imaginaire économique à la construction d'une société alternative*, 2004; *Le pari de la décroissance*, 2006; *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine*, 2007.

In your book *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine*, you state that “degrowth is a political slogan with theoretical implications.” As a slogan, however, it does not seem capable of drawing much consensus.

Actually, we had tried to find other catchwords synthesizing our ideas, such as, for example, “aftergrowth”. We realized, however, that they were not equally persuasive, so we finally opted for “degrowth”.

It is a slogan coined for rich countries, where it catches the ear precisely because for most people the concept “degrowth” is absurd, inconceivable. A more accurate definition would actually be “non-growth”, since the issue is to abandon the logic of boundless development to usher in a new era when we’ll be able to lead a better life while consuming and working less. The concept of “degrowth” puts the stress on the need to give up the objective of unlimited growth. It is a means to spread awareness that it is no longer possible to found the organization of our societies on boundless accumulation. We use the term “degrowth” to draw attention to the fact that today we have reached a point when economic growth has come to clash with the finiteness of the Earth, which can no longer metabolize the human ecological footprint.

Does it make sense to speak of degrowth for developing countries as well?

As I wrote in my *Petit traité*, degrowth also concerns southern societies insofar as they are engaged in developing growth economies. They should avoid getting trapped in the dead end this adventure will inevitably lead them into.

As regards poor countries, we should strive to help them to develop in such a way as to enter the virtuous cycle of the eight “Rs”: reconceptualizing (i.e., redefining the concepts of wealth and poverty, scarcity and abundance); restructuring (adapting society and economy to degrowth); restoring (first and foremost, peasant agriculture); redistributing; relocating; reducing (i.e., limiting the impact of human beings on the environment); reusing; recycling.

The notion of “degrowth” appears to be heavily influenced by the theories of Marcel Mauss, notably his so-called “theory of the gift”, which many today regard as obsolete.

The notion certainly owes a lot to anthropological critiques of economy, and hence to David Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, but also to Karl Paul Polanyi and Marshall Sahlins. Economic anthropology, however, is not our only cultural influence. The other one is ecological economy, most notably the theories of Georgescu-Roegen.

Personally, I believe that today the notion of merging the market system with the culture of the gift is far from outdated. On the contrary, this is more urgent today than in the past, because everywhere in the world people are losing their sense of solidarity.

Furthermore, it appears to me that among young people today there is a strong urge to find a compromise between modernity, consumer society, and new forms of solidarity.

Environmentalism claims, however, do not seem to encounter as wide a consensus as they did in the past. Looking at the European situation, the so-called “green” parties appear to be struggling everywhere.

The degrowth movement is, in a way, a new form of environmentalism. Many regard it as an evolution of political ecology. The latter discipline already contained the concept of degrowth *in nuce*, although it did not make it explicit; I am thinking, for example, of André Gorz or Ivan Illich.

I believe that, from the moment they decided to embrace “politicized politics”, green parties left their convictions behind and betrayed political ecology. In France, too, we are encountering difficulties in persuading the Green party to include degrowth in its political program, whereas under normal circumstances they should have been the first promoters of this concept. The fact is that environmentalist parties have espoused the logic of political compromise and alliances, and have thus ended up losing a lot of their innovative drive.

Do you think a new environmentalism is possible, where the concept of degrowth is coupled with the aspirations of movements struggling against globalization, as well as the approach of those – like, for example, Jeremy Rifkin – who see technology as an indispensable instrument to cope with environmental emergencies?

One must be very clear on this. We firmly believe that technology cannot solve environmental problems. Technology cannot reduce the ecological impact of continued economic growth. Unless we give up our addiction to growth, technological innovations will not help in the least.

In the past, for example, I developed an interest in bio-fuels, because when I was studying Africa there were some very interesting projects to obtain fuel from certain inedible plants. Today, however, I regard it as folly to grow maize on millions of hectares to produce bio-fuels, especially in poor countries where people are starving. In a degrowth perspective, biomasses (especially those derived from inedible plants) could indeed provide energy for indispensable equipment. Bio-fuels, however, are mainly produced as propellants for automobiles, and this is really absurd.

As to the anti-globalization movement, there are deep contradictions within it. Furthermore, it is not that permeable to the concept of degrowth. The alliance of the European Left and the third-worldists, who are both totally drenched in productivism, could lead to a catastrophe. For example, it is not true at all that the world will be saved by opening the market to agricultural products from developing countries. On the contrary, it may be saved by relocating agricultural activities.

Fortunately, over the last few years some personalities have taken a stand in favor of degrowth; most notably, Vandana Shiva and Gustavo Esteva, the founder of the Universidad de la Tierra in Mexico.

It is not just the anti-globalization movements that are not drawn to the concept of degrowth. In developing countries, most people wish to emulate the lifestyle of industrialized countries. Evidently, the Western eco-

conomic model appears more seductive than the prospect of degrowth.

I believe that this is a result of a “colonization of the imaginary”. Poor people are also the most easily manipulated. In developing countries, right-wing populism has always been able to seduce the masses. Furthermore, in part the wish to live a Western lifestyle has been fuelled with violence. One need only think of China: its Westernization was achieved at the price of two opium wars and fifty years of Marxist Westernization. Neither the Christian tradition nor Marxism have encouraged a balanced relationship between human beings and the natural environment.

Today, however, I see some timid signs of change: notably in Evo Morales’ Bolivia and Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela. Both countries are interested in degrowth. However, Morales and Chávez’s attempts will find obstacles on the way, because Western ethnocentrism is presently regaining strength. In this context, degrowth can be a useful means to go beyond Westerncentrism and promote an eco-anthropocentric vision in the world.

Could degrowth be translated into a political program?

We do not think that the degrowth movement should organize as a party because this would threaten to turn us all into practitioners of “politicized politics”.

The need to avoid a global ecological catastrophe could lead to new forms of Neo-Fascist ideology. Our main objective is to prevent this by influencing the principal actors in the current political debate and stimulating the virtuous behavior required to eventually achieve ecological democracy.

However, degrowth can also be a political concept. Some ground principles of our theory have been picked up upon by the Green Party and Rifondazione Comunista in the Italian electoral campaign of 2006. The Italian movements against the *grandi opere* – major infrastructure building projects – have also adopted a degrowth perspective.

In my book *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine* I propose a political program of sorts, which can be summarized in the following 9 points: 1) working our way back to an ecological footprint that is equal or inferior to a planet; 2) including in transportation costs the damages caused by transportation; 3) relocating industrial and agricultural activities; 4) reviving peasant agriculture; 5) converting productivity increases into reduction of working time and job creation; 6) stimulating the production of “relational commodities” such as friendship and knowledge; 7) reducing energy waste; 8) strongly penalizing advertising expenses; 9) calling a moratorium on technical and scientific innovation; 10) regaining control of money by imposing regulations on banks and supporting local currencies.

In the book, I also support the proposals of the association Attac (Association for the Taxing of Financial Transactions and Help to Citizens, created in 1998) to tax stock transactions, the profits of multinational companies, carbon emissions, and nuclear waste.