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# Futures

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## Introduction

# Degrowth futures and democracy

## 1. A degrowth future?

Over 40 years have passed since the publication of *Limits to growth*, a report that warned on the limits of exponential population and economic growth in a planet of finite resources [1]. Meadow et al.'s predictions were forgotten in the frenzy of the post oil-crisis economic growth of the 1980s and the 1990s, a growth that we now know that was fuelled by a fictitious financial economy [2]. It appears in retrospect that most of the *Limits to growth* predictions were right [3]. Peak-oil, climate change and accelerating ecosystem degradation, coupled with an unprecedented socio-economic crisis with biophysical roots [2,4] have put back in the agenda the idea that growth and sustainability are incompatible [5–7]. A growing coalition of academics and activists is explicitly calling for collectively devising and implementing a degrowth transition, a socially equitable and democratic process of downscaling the economy and bringing it within ecological limits [2,6,8–10].

One of the most influential writers on the topic, Latouche, defines degrowth as “a political slogan with theoretical implications” [54], whose function is to open up conceptual and practical opportunities for escaping the impasse and mentality of the current economy [55]. This requires avoiding the trap of getting tangled in economic proposals and an economic idiom when envisioning the transition to a degrowth society, i.e. avoiding the “economicism” that characterizes industrial society and which is at the heart of the ideology of development [50]. The word “degrowth” was originally coined in French where it has also positive connotations; although the term does not always translate in other languages as a positive concept, it works pretty well as a slogan and as a “missile concept” [51]. The use of the word degrowth typically generates vivid reactions and serves to stimulate profound political debates about the type of future we want to inhabit. Within the scientific community, the impact of “degrowth” is felt in numerous recent regional and international conferences (such as in Paris 2008 and Barcelona 2010, and the forthcoming events in Montreal 2012 and Venice 2012), international publications,<sup>1</sup> and in civil society movements in France, Italy, Spain, Canada and Greece [40].

However, beyond the slogan the contours of a plausible degrowth transition are far from clear. Although Latouche [55] argues that degrowth is the only project that can renew the political left, the social action and politics that will bring the degrowth transition and the institutional changes entailed are generally underspecified. Our special issue is motivated by the need to consider what forms of democracy and democratic institutions can make the degrowth transition possible and socially sustainable, and by the somehow inverse need to consider what are the implications of economic degrowth for democracy. Beyond considering what a degrowth world could look like, these intertwined needs raise fundamental political questions as regards the transition to degrowth, which this special issue tries to address. What could the core institutions of a degrowth world be like? What sort of a political subject that can mobilize a degrowth transition, and is such a subject emerging in contemporary society? With its focus on possible and alternative futures of human endeavour, *Futures* is the par excellence journal to host such research questions. Links between democracy and sustainability have been a key concern for the journal *Futures* ever since its inception, with seminal publications on – among other themes – post-normal science [26,29,30]. Our publication aims at continuing this productive path [11–28].

A central post-normal science thesis is that, for issues characterized by uncertainty and high values at stake, science cannot escape the political arena or take refuge in the neutral field of scientific truth, because the quality of the decision-making process cannot be guaranteed. Post-normal science calls for the demystification of scientists as “truth holders” and their repositioning as guarantors of the quality of a collective decision process. Similarly, a key degrowth thesis is that (the science and practice of) economics has colonized and depoliticized collective social choice [6,31,32]. Indeed the degrowth

<sup>1</sup> See for instance [6,10,49,52], the special issue in the *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 18 (2010), and forthcoming special issues on degrowth planned for 2012 in the *Journals of Ecological Economics*, *Environmental Values* and the *Journal of Cleaner Production*.

project is not conceived by its advocates as merely a bio-physical question of “staying within limits” or producing and consuming less (one can easily imagine authoritative yet “green” or dematerialized futures and the movie “Matrix” provides an interesting science-fiction example of these). Degrowth is a broader project of “escaping the economy”, re-embedding economic functions and decisions within the social and political sphere and hence deepening and re-politicizing our democracies [6,33]. Controlling and scaling down the run-away, exponentially and autonomously growing technological system [34] is part and parcel of this process of reasserting popular control over collective destiny. The relationship between degrowth as a process and a radical socio-political project, and democracy (in its various facets, such as liberal, deliberative, direct, radical, inclusive, etc.) is the connecting thread for the contributions to this special issue. Our contributors look at the reasons for a degrowth transition, the politics of the transition and the role different political and economic may actors play in it, and its relationship to different institutional arrangements at different scales. Before presenting the contributions, we briefly recap on some historical contributions to the debate and then introduce the emerging social-scientific movement of degrowth linking it to the process that produced the intellectual work presented here.

## 2. Intellectual legacies

As regards questions of democracy, a first key influence on the degrowth literature<sup>2</sup> is the work of Ivan Illich and his criticism of large techno-bureaucratic systems of health, transport, and education provision [35–37]. Illich's main thesis, central to this special issue, concerns the inverse relationship between scale and democracy. Above a certain scale of a system, not least in terms of its energy use, the distribution of power can only become more and more uneven as a ruling class emerges which knows best how to manage the complex system, and which appropriates unevenly the surplus given its privileged position.

Put differently, only small systems can be democratically and collectively controlled. Complex systems can only be known and managed by experts, and this erodes democracy as the population at large has to trust the knowledge and will of these experts, who accordingly concentrate immense power in their hands. Illich argued that participatory democracy requires low-energy technologies, or what he called “convivial tools”, i.e. tools which, unlike industrial tools, allow users the freedom to decide their use, and which do not necessitate other tools and energy-intensive and complexly organized processes for their production [35]. Illich criticized the “radical monopoly” exercised by large scale technological systems and infrastructures (such as automobiles or hospitals), monopolies in the sense that users have little room for choice since the increasing importance of these institutions makes it impossible to do without them as well as it contributes to structure society according to their presence.

Jacques Ellul is another important critic of technology. In his work, Ellul described the autonomous path taken by technological development after industrialization (technological change for technological change's sake) and the elusiveness of any form of governmental control to tame technology and direct it to intended ends [34]. Ellul had an important message concerning democracy: while we (in the West) think that we live within democratic systems that govern and direct the pace and path of technological and related social change, in reality we live in a “technological society”, where technology changes and we follow, adapting our lives, social arrangements and institutional configurations to its ever-changing requirements. We are slaves of a system that we ourselves have created, and only if we realize this we stand any change of autonomously choosing the future path of our society.<sup>3</sup>

This quest for autonomy is also a key focus of the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, a thinker who has heavily influenced degrowth thinking. With autonomy, Castoriadis referred to the capacity of a society to collectively and continuously reflect upon (i.e. put in question and change) its norms and institutions. This process of self-institution finds its opposite in religious dogmas that pose universal and eternal truths and norms that are not to be questioned. Castoriadis' notions of “economic development” and “growth” as the modern-day, secular equivalent of religious dogmas, are crucial for degrowth. Growth, he argued, is to be pursued for growth's sake [38], so that questioning the desirability of growth leads to ones' indirect expulsion from a political debate. In Western societies economists are the secular experts who hold the truth of the economy, the only ones capable of deciphering its “messages”, akin to religion's priests. Castoriadis linked the increasing emphasis of modern societies on economic development and growth with their intensifying depoliticization, noting that a growing number of important decisions and institutions are no longer up for collective reflection but restrained to the realm of expertise. This undermines autonomy as the realm of what society can collectively institute is restrained. As a response, Castoriadis advocated a revolutionary project of “direct democracy”, which instead of a violent take-over of governmental power involves spontaneous popular processes of autonomous “self-institution”, i.e. processes where collectives in a rapid surge of self-determination take matters on their own hands, and decide to question and reclaim institutions from experts. The May 1968 movement and perhaps even the more recent 15 M movement of the *indignados* in Spain can be seen as examples of such moments of direct-democratic claim to self-institution.

Those interrelated concerns over scale, technology and autonomy/self-institution are at the core of degrowth thinking today as in the work of Latouche [6]. Latouche goes beyond the conventional weak-versus-strong sustainability and limits to

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed review of the historical lineages of degrowth see [10].

<sup>3</sup> Ellul upholds also that the technology is completely independent from the underlying economic or political conditions, on this point we do not agree with the author.

growth debates, and engages on a more integrated social and institutional envisioning of de (or non) growing societies, which transcends bio-physical factors only. Reducing the scale of the economy, re-appropriating technological tools and self-instituting new spaces of choice and social interaction outside of market money exchange are seen as part and parcel of a deepening democratization process. The objective is not just to consume and produce less, but to do so in a socially emancipatory and democratizing way. Some see this as possible within a plausible evolution of parliamentary democracy [6], while others see a fundamental interconnection between liberal democracies, capitalism and economic growth, calling for a radical overhaul of the political-economic system and a re-institution along lines of direct, localized democracy and economy [39]. Questions regarding the links between democracies and degrowth are at the heart of this special issue and leads contributors to explore the relevance of various forms (e.g. deliberative, inclusive, etc.) and aspects (e.g. economic) of democracy that may coevolve with degrowth.

### 3. Activist legacies: the degrowth movement

“Degrowth” often refers not only to the process of economic downscaling, but also to the social movement that calls for it, the origins of which are to be found in France [40,41]. In the last couple of years this movement is taking off in many other parts of the world, beyond its initial Euro-Mediterranean scope. Direct democracy and self-organizational processes of consensus are the preferred decision procedures of the movement not only in theoretical-normative terms, but also in terms of its own practice and internal procedures, which are governed by principles of collaboration, experimentation, sharing and open and free knowledge-ware [33]. The degrowth movement emerged at the confluence of activism and science [10] and many of the individuals involved transcend intellectual-activist dichotomies and divisions, practicing in their everyday and political life what they “preach” or what they analyse at a theoretical level [42]. The ideal of “post-normal science” [27,30] is strong within some degrowth activists: the science of degrowth is not to be done by scientists alone but, being complex and dealing with high stakes, together and subject to the “peer-reviewing” of an extended community of non-experts, activists and politically engaged collectives and individuals. Some activists in the degrowth movement therefore not only share the necessity to re-politicize the interface between science society and governance, but also purport to develop a socialized and copy-free model of scientific production.

The 2nd International Conference on Degrowth from which this Special Issue resulted, was organized along such principles of direct democracy and post-normal science. Some 400 academics,<sup>4</sup> practitioners and activists from 40 different countries attended the conference. A small portion of the conference was dedicated to plenary sessions and standard academic-style paper presentations. In addition, poster sessions included contributions from both academics and non-academics and were conducted in such a format that allowed constant interaction. Unusually for conventional conferences, half of it was devoted to thematic group discussions on topical issues such as limiting natural resources extraction, controlling advertising, reforming the financial system, developing community currencies, reducing working time, etc., that were horizontally organized and self-managed using participative techniques. Proposals from individual groups were presented and scrutinized in plenary assemblies with a constant back-and-forth between thematic groups and assemblies. A parallel conference was also organized by the Free-university La Rimaia, a nearby squat, where the same proposals were discussed by young people who did not wish to work as volunteers in the conference (a condition for waiving fees) or who simply wished to have their own independent discussions in Catalan.<sup>5</sup> The results from the parallel conference and the main conference thematic groups were synthesized in a common declaration text with the use of a wiki-technology and made available in the conference website (<http://www.degrowth.eu>). In our view it is not a coincidence that the degrowth conference resembled the assembly based, self-organized deliberation model that was adopted by the 15 M movement for “real democracy” in the squares of Barcelona and other Spanish cities a year after, as many of the conference organizers are organic participants in the Spanish social movements.

Interestingly, the conference attempted to fuse the procedural with the material in the production of the conference space. Many volunteers worked in the kitchen, and all attendants were asked to contribute by washing their own dishes after lunch. Participants were not mere consumers of the event, but actual co-producers actively engaged in the preparation of rooms, cleaning of spaces, etc. The degrowth principles of work-sharing and the call for a collapse of conventional divisions between manual and intellectual work were embodied, even if tentatively and at a small scale, in the realization of the conference bringing together material and procedural democratization.

### 4. This special issue

This special issue presents selected contributions from the 2nd International degrowth conference that engaged with the questions: “What is the political dimension behind the degrowth slogan?”, “What sort of politics are necessary for a transition towards a degrowth society?”. And “what sort of social actors and types of subjects can bring the degrowth transition?” We divide this collection into two parts: contributions that focus on conceptual aspects which consolidate the

<sup>4</sup> About half of which were activists and practitioners.

<sup>5</sup> The working language of the conference was English, though volunteer translators contributed to their language of knowledge where possible and in all plenaries.

relevance of degrowth from a philosophical, sociological and economic perspective by linking it to questions of democracy; and visualizations of degrowth, which involves contributions that advance the political relevance of degrowth by discussing plausible future models of degrowth democracies applicable at different scales, physical spaces and times. Both parts advance degrowth by extending its conceptual reach and by stretching the limits of degrowth practices through reflection on its political dimensions and implications.

## 5. Conceptual aspects: making and strengthening the case for degrowth

The scale perspective emerges as a key concern of our contributors as regards future degrowth politics. *Mauro Bonaiuti* takes a comprehensive view relating the growth of economic scale to its future ecological, social and political consequences, given that physical limits to growth have been reached. His contribution is premised upon the idea that as the economy grows and its scale gets bigger, social ties are dissolved and a *homo consumens* type of subject becomes the dominant imaginary of a post-modern society in which democratic power is limited by the ever-growing importance of market choice. A trade-off between the scale of the economy and democracy – an idea close to Illich' conception of autonomy – becomes evident in the immensely complex technical and bureaucratic systems and in the limited number of people empowered to control them, having a serious consequence in terms of massive uniformization of values. Bonaiuti's key finding is that, constrained by resource scarcity, a degrowth society will come through new subjects who will manage society at more simple and lower scales in a transition beyond consumerism. In conclusion, Bonaiuti argues that the institutional democratic framework will have to change: in an optimistic scenario cooperation among decentralized, smaller scale, informal organizations will increase, with an effect on more ecological, equitable, autonomous organization and hence more direct democracy. To avoid the pessimistic scenario of a green totalitarianism, Bonaiuti argues that a new degrowth society needs to be envisioned on the basis of more sustainable collective imaginaries.

The change in the collective imaginary that Bonaiuti advocates might stem as the result of an effective questioning of what does the right to a good life mean, an inquiry that goes beyond the desire for growth in material affluence. This is the question entertained by *Barbara Muraca*. Her essay offers a philosophical account of what is justice, what do we mean by a 'good life' and what are the implications on our understanding of growth and degrowth. Focusing on the moral and ethical considerations of achieving continuous growth – i.e. independently of the physical possibility of doing so – Muraca considers the principle of distributive justice as a pre-requisite of a good life and, more specifically, she focuses on the procedure of the capabilities approach as developed by Sen and Nussbaum. The author first demonstrates how this offers a better theory of intergenerational and intragenerational justice than welfarism or resourcism. The capabilities approach considers that only what people give value to is really important; however, this must not be seen as an individualistic exercise: a collective democratic process should help defining the expected functions of a good life and who has the authority to decide them. On the other hand, democratic institutions should provide the substantial conditions for a good life and not merely promote its fulfillment. Second, under the light of the capability approach Muraca considers the potential of growth and degrowth to contribute to a 'just and good' life. She exposes the inaccuracy of certain socially detrimental pro-growth ideas, which represent an impediment to a good life and contribute only to positional competition [47] – a vicious process also highlighted by Bonaiuti – and maintains the focus on the value of social relationships and on recognition beyond the market. This leads her to conclude that a critical challenge for democracy and degrowth is not only how to achieve a good life but also to decide who and why has a saying in determining what a good life is.

The dilemma about future and degrowth, with plausible scenarios ranging from a sustainable degrowth transition to a catastrophic post peak-oil collapse to Hobbesian state of *homo homini lupus* is at the core of *Ernest Garcia's* contribution. If our present growth-based society is coming to an end, he argues, the implications will be hard for present theories of social change: based on the idea of (sustainable) development, they do not contemplate the possibility of a societal collapse, a dilemma related to how these theories conceive human nature and free will. The relationship between degrowth and the human nature, laying at the core of this paper is searched in philosophical theories, the study of past societies and in the anthropological insights obtained from studies of long-sustainable small-scale societies. Nonetheless, Garcia makes clear that free will cannot be determined a priori, so that what we can learn from the past or from the others, can only serve as an inspiration, and does not offer any certainty. In collaboration with these disciplines, contemporary sociology, Garcia claims, is well-placed to begin the never-before attempted investigation of the human condition and its will to adapt or collapse. He offers examples of how grass-roots and social movements are considering this crisis as an opportunity for social change, and how a constant faith in technological progress can be environmentally detrimental. So, what could sociologically be a "benign degrowth paradigm"? Considering the positive role of creating new imaginaries, Garcia calls for the Utopian construction of alternative new worlds. Since the future is open to our free will, the task of imagining a new and more democratic society, beyond the growth paradigm and outdated visions of development, will contribute as a theoretical inspiration to the degrowth cause.

How does degrowth fit within the democratic tradition and with present forms and processes of democratic institutions is the question that *Marco Deriu* formulates in order to deal with a degrowth democratic future. The historically established association of liberal democracies with economic freedom, hence with unlimited growth and absolute sovereignty, now needs to be reformulated by the paradoxical recognition of democratic limits to economic freedom and growth; as a consequence, new scenarios of future democratic institutional and procedural regeneration need to be imagined. Liberal democracies and the right for market freedom against absolutist State and Church powers contributed to the dissolution of

these tyrannies. But the imaginary of a limitless freedom of economic growth has degenerated nowadays into a capitalist tyranny placed above many democratic powers. From a degrowth perspective – argues Deriu – the paradox of democratic freedom and its sovereignty lies in the recognition of its limits. This topic is related to economic democracy – with perspectives that Johanishova and Wolf and Boillat et al., present in this issue – and with proposals of political reformulation, which Deriu develops in his contribution. The proposals he offers represent plausible answers for the reconfiguration of the objectives of politics and for a radical reformulation of its institutions which, far from demolishing the present democratic apparatus, can be improved and enhanced. Some of the proposals put forward are a “cultural un-learning” discriminating what is useless with respect to social and ecological imperatives; deliberative assemblies, new arenas where all citizens should have a say; and popular learning with a democratization of scientific knowledge and respect for future generations and non-humans. Deriu calls for new institutions and procedures created outside established institutional arenas, and pressing hence the State to bring in the necessary internal reforms. Such new institutions constitute a challenge to the democratic process to get back to its own roots. Deriu finds inspiration in the movements and parallel institutions generated worldwide, starting with the Mediterranean upheavals for real democracy in 2011 and spreading around the world.

Considered from the micro economic perspective, the concept of degrowth is closely related to economic democracy. Constant growth in a firm leads to market concentration, monopolistic control and political influence: if the capitalist firm and its market influence are highly undemocratic, examples of non-capitalist firms, together with measures to limit capitalist power, can more adequately realize the potential for both degrowth and an economic democracy. *Nadia Johanishova* and *Stephan Wolf* explore different aspects of economic democracy, sparking a discussion about the meaning of the term and its relevance for degrowth. They understand economic democracy as “a system of checks and balances on economic power and support for the right of citizens to actively participate in the economy, regardless of their status, race, gender” and present a theoretical paper with ideas of how to conceive and enhance economic democracy. *Johanisova* and *Wolf*'s economic democracy concept advances the right of citizens to participate in the economy shifting their role from passive consumers to engaged and productive subjects. In such a context, they claim, access to and the typology of the means of production are crucial. Reclamation of the commons, more strict market and corporate legislation, regulation, alternative currencies, democratic governance within firms, social enterprises as well as individual and informal organizations are institutions and elements to be included in future degrowth democracies. Finally, re-distributional justice over basic economic assets – and not only income flows stemming from them – would guarantee certain capabilities. Their contribution helps to clarify that the principle of economic freedom would be based exclusively on economic democracy, defined by a plurality of (market) places, actors and operative scales as diverse as self-employment, subsistence beyond the market, local markets and ethical consumption. These are the premises for a society of plural economic decision-making, with lower scale and impact.

## 6. Visualizing future degrowth-democracy constellations

The remaining four contributions discuss into some depth the relationship between degrowth and democracy and attempt to explore possible and desirable futures, even if tentatively. *Konrad Ott* uses formal logic to evaluate different interpretations of degrowth and their compatibility with different models of democracy. Ott is cautious of radical interpretations of degrowth that link growth with capitalism, and capitalism with liberal democracy, subsequently calling for an overthrow of capitalism and parliamentary democracy. Ott argues that big changes are inherently risky and Utopias easily degrade into dictatorships; despite its imperfections, liberal democracy is an advancement over previous regimes and we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. His preferable formulation of degrowth is one consisting of strategies to abolish GDP, promote policies for strong sustainability and support alternative, non-growth economic cultures of conviviality. Against *Latouche*'s position on the need to overcome the capitalist mode of production [6], Ott argues that change should not go as far as altering the fundamental institutions and structures of capitalist societies. Siding with this interpretation of degrowth, Ott then stresses that the most compatible democratic model for implementing this vision is that of a *Habermasian* deliberative liberal democracy, with enhanced institutional spaces for interaction and arenas for meaningful dialogue between State, civil society and private actors. Ott's vision is one of a deepened, more deliberative and participatory liberal democracy, existing side-by-side with eco-modernized economies that will no longer grow materially.

*Onofrio Romano*'s vision is radically different. Romano sees a fundamental contradiction in the foundational core of liberal democracies, more specifically in the primacy ascribed to personal liberty, which makes impossible the collective synthesis of individual visions and desires and the realization of the promise of democracy for collective sovereignty. This paradox of democracy under modernity is overcome in existing liberal democracies, Romano maintains, via ‘neutralitarian’ politics (or using *Castoriadis*' terms, a depoliticized politics), which in the name of impartiality to individual claims ascribes primacy to “technique”, i.e. technology for technology's sake, or growth for growth's sake, in effect emptying democracy of its function. Instead of a Western dematerialized deliberative democracy, Romano envisages an unruly, “productively unproductive” and anti-utilitarian northern-Mediterranean type of democracy. A really democratic degrowth society is possible, Romano argues, only if we deflate the Western primacy ascribed to personal subjectivity, and allow more room for collective visioning within local communities. Mediterranean subjectivities are much closer to this ideal subject that Romano calls “the dethinking subject”, and offer a better basis for a degrowth transition. Romano holds scorn for the conventional degrowth proposal that privileges voluntary simplicity, reduced consumption and a relocalized economy. The association between local economy and direct democracy should not be taken for granted, Romano argues contrary to *Johanishova* and *Wolf*,

reminding that small communities are often undemocratic. Furthermore, the strategy of voluntary simplicity is full of ethical paternalism, and out of tune with real societal trends and the prevailing modern imaginary of wasteful, often non-utilitarian, consumption. Fortunately this is much closer to the traditional Mediterranean ideal, which can be mobilized to give it new meaning and form. Romano argues that degrowth, in its dominant formulation that he wants to overthrow, tries to revive and redouble the obsolete Protestant ethics – capitalist *bourgeois* values that emerged triumphant at the end of the English Revolution<sup>6</sup> – of self-restraint, calculation, control and utility-seeking. Justifying degrowth in techno-scientific terms of a catastrophe “soon to come” and understood only by a few privileged scientists, degrowth favours expert knowledge and hence reproduces the depoliticizing technical bias that it seeks to avoid.

*Ted Trainer's* contribution instead is stimulated by what Romano criticizes, i.e. the sense of an ultimate countdown that has already begun. The author goes to some length to systematically demonstrate that scarcer natural resources mean that even a zero growth scenario is already impossible. Using simple arithmetic, he points out that resource productivity cannot increase fast enough to cope with the depletion of critical resources. Neither technical innovations can make it so quickly, nor renewable resources can help maintain the present affluence for a worldwide human population. The solution is degrowth but contrary to Jackson's [5,45] or also Ott's (this issue) vision, for Trainer degrowth can only occur outside capitalism and in particular within new, non-capitalist micro-economies. Trainer proposes a “Simpler Way”, characterized by inclusive and participative democracy, arguing that potent alternatives to global capitalism mainly exist at the local scale. Importantly, the transition towards the Simpler Way involves the co-existence and spreading of this new, more cooperative, less materialistic, and highly localized economy within a mainstream economy, which is destined to shrink to the bone. Governance will be tied to local knowledge and resource management, therefore subject to a more democratic scrutiny. The Simpler Way approach, Trainer contends, challenges current green, left, and mainstream efforts to solve global problems. Trainer contends that even if such green or left political parties were to take state power, they would be doomed to make no difference given the context of the current capitalist system, which makes accumulation an imperative, and turns no-growth to social crisis. In that sense, he is critical of consuming political energy on what he sees as reformist initiatives such as the Transition Town movement or the electoral support for green candidates. He nonetheless outlines the importance of working towards changing consciousness since the ways in which people think are essential stumbling blocks on the way to system change. Trainer advocates establishing the key elements of the Simpler Way here and now within the system and without waiting for the end of the consumerist-capitalist society in order to begin building the new society.

Exploring a ‘real-life’ experience, Boillat et al. provide an example of small-scale agroecology in Cuba that resounds some of the elements depicted by Trainer in the Simpler Way. By doing so the authors try to explore the real-life possibilities of implementing degrowth at a larger scale in a non-liberal and non-democratic context (i.e. Cuba), given their contention that degrowth is unlikely to occur within an economy based on capital accumulation and free market of assets. The authors first explore the main theoretical models of economic democracy and their potential for achieving sustainable degrowth, concluding that models of self-managed socialism are best positioned to do so. They then move on to discuss the Cuban agroecology experience, constituted by different farming enterprises, related to different socialist models. Their performance is assessed in terms of decision autonomy and degrowth: the empirical evidence confirms that the best managerial system, allowing greater autonomy and best response towards a degrowth agroecological transition is characterized by collective self-organization and local decision power. Although accepting that the Cuban economy, which limits private accumulation of capital and productive assets, may be better placed for achieving forms of sustainable degrowth than capitalist economies, the authors point out that this would be even more so the case if Cuba had political democracy. Self-organization would be the most adequate response to a shock in the system: local answers are required as the central government system will not be able to process enough information to keep it all under control. The Cuban case is different from a capitalist society, but similarly, the communist government model in charge of political-economic planning and decisions bears similarities to corporate governance in the West whose objectives are often in collusion with, although protected by the government. By continuing the current process of increasing small-producer autonomy, the Cuban agricultural system could respond to the challenge of freeing itself from the central planning tradition, and highlights the importance of democratically governed small-scale farmer cooperatives for achieving the degrowth-oriented goals of agroecology.

## 7. Conclusions

The pressing reality that physical and social limits to growth also have political consequences comprises a starting point for this special issue. Two central political implications emerge out of the contributions for this special issue as key for exploring links between degrowth and democracy. The first one concerns the characteristics of the political subjects who can mobilize a degrowth transition, whereas the second focuses on issues concerning the development of core institutions for degrowth. We close this introductory section with a consideration of what this special issue's contributions add in terms of both lessons learned and in terms of new questions they open-up for degrowth research and activism.

<sup>6</sup> It would be historically incorrect to assume that capitalist bourgeois values were the only ones around during that revolution, which was literally plagued by radical social values and practices [53]. It would be similarly incorrect to assume that all protestant values are propelled by individualist calculation and utility-seeking and lack collective spirit [44].

A concern with the characteristics of the political subject that could facilitate degrowth transitions runs along several contributions to this special issue. The overall conclusion is that multiple identities of political actors could facilitate such transitions. These may include common people, protagonists of both new and traditional social values (Romano) and qualified to define the capabilities for achieving a good life (Muraca), and thus able to envision other collective imaginaries in which the quest for autonomy becomes a democratic project (Bonaiuti). They may also involve concerned citizens participating in new political arenas both independent and in support of more traditional larger-scale democratic institutions (Deriu and Ott), as well as pragmatic activists who are already starting up decentralized semi-autonomous life projects (Trainer), and localized economic decision-makers who work on more informal and cooperative basis (Boillat et al. and Johanishova & Wolf). Notwithstanding this diversity of potential political actors, the special issue illustrates the relevance of broadly speaking two types of human being for advancing towards degrowth futures. Romano's approach for example poses that those actors would come from 'the common people' and that they would be able to overcome their subjectivity to produce a collective visioning. Somehow on the opposite side of the spectrum, Muraca pictures an actor who is able first as an individual to define capabilities for achieving a good life, and thus envisions other collective imaginaries in which the quest for autonomy becomes a democratic project. Although this differing emphasis on the importance of individual subjectivities versus 'the collective' as a starting point for pursuing degrowth imaginaries could be a point of contention, it also indicates that both models may include promising characteristics for advancing politically toward degrowth futures.

A first question that emerges out of this elaboration of the characteristics of the political subject, which has been contributed by the authors of this special issue is if it is indeed important or necessary to know what that 'subject' looks like. Inspired by Castoriadis' elaborations on the relevance of social imaginaries for enacting action, this question poses that trying to define this subject may not be so helpful, given that society's strongest imaginaries tend to transcend commonly understood groupings of class, race, gender, etc. An obvious example of this concerns the imaginary of growth. This understanding implies that energy and attention should focus on changing such strong, common imaginaries and not on trying to pin down the proper subject in order to perhaps strengthen her legitimacy and the legitimacy of her practices to help achieve degrowth transitions. This debate does not seem to exist either within the degrowth literature or activist movement, and academia could ponder both in terms of an analysis within the philosophical tradition in political sciences (e.g. as the one by Muraca in this special issue) and empirically (e.g. with case studies of past and present experiences with those questions) to feed into this debate.

The second question that emerges could perhaps be termed 'the citizenship question'. If we were to accept the relevance of diverse potential political subjects for pursuing degrowth futures, then what sort of a relation between individual citizen and authority (citizenship imaginaries) does each of these diverse subjects imply and enact? Historical experience and present examples illustrate that achieving democratic change frequently requires a shift in the imaginaries that feed into this relationship. For example, in the case of the 17th century English civil war, the justification for moving from an absolutist (absolute monarchy) to a more collective (i.e. Parliamentary) control of public decision-making required a shift in the imaginary regarding the source of authority (from God to the people) of the head of state and a consequent shift as regards the relationship between citizen and authority. Similar insights could perhaps be pondered concerning the recent 'Arab spring revolutions' although in those cases the jury is still out as regards their final outcome in terms of democracy.

What is important in terms of degrowth transitions is that the insistence of most formal centres of public decision-making authority (e.g. governments and the market) on the key role of growth for achieving social goals requires degrowth to consider alternative models of citizenship than those currently at hand. Beginning with the citizenship models that the diverse types of political subject that are brought forth with this special issue imply constitutes an excellent starting point for considering this question. Moreover, although not necessarily essential for advancing democratically towards degrowth futures, a common understanding of citizenship within the degrowth movement could facilitate operationalizing common strategies for pursuing degrowth transitions. Research here could try to discern those different understandings of citizenship within the degrowth movement (involving both academics and activists), identify key differences and key issues that underlie different approaches and then open up spaces for dialogue and collective reflection in the movement as to the meaning and implications of those differences and as to if and how should they be dealt with.

The second thematic priority as regards degrowth futures and democracy that special issue contributions elaborate upon links to the long line of concern on issues of scale and democracy, which goes back to the works of Illich and Ellul. Recent degrowth exponents, including both Latouche and contributors to this special issue, favour the 'local level' as a plausible social site or location where core degrowth institutions may have space to – at least initially – develop. Generally speaking, such preference is premised at the increased capacity assigned to local-level decision-making to allow for more participation and direct control, hence more legitimacy in decision-making processes. As Bonaiuti (this special issue) argues, the local level of political decision-making is the site where realization of autonomy seems more possible, while Johanishova and Wolf explain that at lower scales 'the economic' is primarily connected to 'the political' which allows for more direct and democratic control of economic activity. Deriu's concept of democratic refoundation and Ott's urge for strengthening deliberative institutions provide vital ideas as regards ways of enhancing participation in decisions at the 'local' level that seek to propel transition to degrowth futures. Moreover, their ideas help pursue collective citizen definitions of capabilities and hence get closer to the realization of the capabilities approach, which Muraca constitutes as an essential normative underpinning for degrowth.

A basic question though emerges when one considers the importance of 'local' level development of core degrowth institutions and this concerns the extent to which such a development can take place within the context of liberal democracies or not. The Gaelic origins of the word "slogan" are *slough* (war) and *ghairm* (cry). If the degrowth cry is increasingly heard, then the question is whether its realization involves waging a "battle" to change existing liberal democracies. The majority, though by no means all, degrowth advocates see a major contradiction and incompatibility between (sustainable) degrowth and capitalism and search inspiration in eco-socialist or eco-communitarian models of social organization. However, even among those who oppose capitalism, there are disagreements on whether liberal representative democracy and capitalism are two sides of the same coin; some see an opposition between degrowth and liberal democracy, others not. Our contributors to this special issue take different positions on the matter, ranging from Ott who calls for a degrowth path that does not seek to confront capitalism and only reforms liberal democracy, to Trainer or Romano who reject capitalism and liberalism, to Boillat et al., who take as granted the advantages of a socialist mode of organization. Future scholarship should first consider whether it is indeed necessary to resolve this issue in order to advance towards democratic degrowth futures. Historical approaches could be interesting here. For example, it is sufficiently evidenced that similar debates have existed within some social movements in the past (e.g. late 19th and early 20th century anarchism) between those espousing the importance of sudden 'breaks' with the system and those opting for making change at the margin hoping to achieve shifts in the social imaginary by 'propaganda by deed' [48]. A regular criticism of the latter approach goes that the powerful context ends up exterminating or even some times appropriating such initiatives in those cases that they become too powerful or dangerous (a capacity anyway doubted by those critics). No matter what the 'correct' answer may be, degrowth activism could first open the debate in those terms and then consider the necessity of finding an answer, while research could help with providing insights from past (with what Garcia proposes about learning from pre-industrial and aboriginal societies or with historical studies e.g. similar to the above mentioned example) or even present experiences (e.g. via case study research) of trying to tackle the issue.

This basic question essentially leads to several related sub-questions, such as: what is the meaning of 'radical' (in terms of change understood as a 'change from the roots')? Is it 'radical' to seek an abrupt, shock-laden, systemic change, or is it 'radical' to pursue changes at the margin betting on their capacity to produce slow shifts in the collective imaginary (e.g. through social learning) by establishing day-to-day practices 'at the margin'? Is it desirable (or necessary) to make a choice between those two ways of seeking change towards degrowth transitions? What understandings of how social change happens, inform these approaches, and what knowledge is available as regards their effectiveness, political implications, etc.? What are the implications of different understandings of how change happens for degrowth, e.g. in terms of strategies available for degrowth transitions?

Historical and current examples of socio-environmental movements attempting to answer those questions do exist, and a first challenge would be to try and bring their insights to bear relevance to the particular characteristics, needs, and requirements of degrowth. With its focus on specific practices (e.g. Boillat et al.) this special issue represents a first step towards this attempt. But perhaps more importantly, what the multitude of questions identified by this special issue implies is that advancing degrowth scholarship hand-in-hand with political activism is an exciting and socially relevant project that lies ahead.

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