

## Short paper session

### Long abstract

**Title:** Degrowth, youth and utopia: understanding the roots of distress in order to take ownership of our future.

**Thematic threads:** organizing society (social movements, self-organized projects, new wave of protest, transforming education); living conviviality (cultural drivers of growth, cultural, anthropological, and ethical perspectives on degrowth).

**Narrative steps:** visions and strategies for transformation. Facing the current crisis: critique & resistance.

**Keywords:** youth, utopia, degrowth, future, distress, nihilism.

Degrowth might exercise a strong power on human mind because it does not only consist in an external and abstract theory, but it envisages a change that starts from inside and it provides people with some practical tools to change themselves and their life, therefore achieving a real and more deep wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

Several data show that, even if gross domestic product has continuously grown, youth suicides in several Western countries (i.e. U.S.A., Canada, Spain) triplicated between 1950 and 1990,<sup>2 3 4</sup> and Major Depressive Disorder prevalence augmented (6,6% actually in USA).<sup>56</sup> Other factors reveal a general malaise, such as alcohol and drug consumption prevalence (43% of European students have been drunk at least once in the last month)<sup>7</sup> and psychotropic drug employment (13% of European students between 15 and 16 years old have taken some psychotropic drug in their life). These data show the top of an iceberg of youth distress which remains mostly under the sea. We do not want to pathologize adolescence, which is defined, in fact, by modern developmental psychology as a developmental crisis, thus a period propaedeutic to the transition to an evolutionary stage of development (maturity).<sup>8</sup> As a crisis period, a certain degree of discomfort is normal. However, the problem we face is in the magnitude of this discomfort, its expression and indefinite prolongation beyond the age of adolescence.<sup>9</sup>

Degrowth thinkers have mostly focused on the analysis of the adults' reality while the world of youth, although retaining some similarities, requires a different approach. Therefore, the path to be elaborated has to be different. Similarly to the adult world, youth distress in the post-modern society is linked with the alienation caused by the growth society. However, it is less related to work or study "alcoholism", money/consumption worries or lack of time for relationships and more linked with the notion of meaning and future.<sup>10</sup>

The psychoanalyst Miguel Benasayag during his clinical practice observed teens asking for psychological help and realized that they were facing a pain that had no psychological origin, but rather reflected a more widespread sense of sadness, a feeling of general insecurity and precariousness that characterizes the whole contemporary society. The author, thus, argues that youngsters are facing an extraordinary crisis, a crisis within the crisis, that does not concern the individual but is the consequence, experienced by the individual, of the crisis of our society. In this context the future has changed aspect: in the past it was a promise, while nowadays it has become a threat.<sup>11</sup>

Galimberti, Professor of History of Philosophy and Dynamic Psychology, continues this analysis building a close correlation between the crisis of the Western cultural foundation and the nihilism present in contemporary society, particularly in youth. "Young people, even if they are not always aware, are sick, and not for the usual existential crises of youth, but because a disturbing host, nihilism, is among them. It seeps through their feelings, confuses their thoughts, deletes perspectives and horizons, saps their souls, making their passions sad and lifeless".<sup>12</sup> We live in an era dominated by what Spinoza called the "sad passions", where the reference is not to suffering or crying, but to impotence, disintegration and lack of meaning. Therefore, the current crisis is something different from the other crises to which the West has successfully adapted, because it is a crisis of the foundations of our civilization, of absolute values (god, the truth, the good), of the vision of human history as an inevitably history of progress towards a salvation.

Today, this optimistic view has collapsed. God is really dead and his heirs (science, socialism and utopia) have failed in fulfilling their promises.<sup>13</sup>

Being young, today, has become a titanic challenge. Teenagers find themselves alone in dealing with the meaning of life, surrounded by a decadent world that is falling apart, in a scenario in which the future of the "promised land" has become a threat. Uprooted from their past (nowadays past is not important, we only look novelty) but with no ability to project themselves in any future, left without guidance (nobody has the courage to face the current economic and cultural crisis), it is almost impossible for youngsters to find their own way, thus ending up groping in the dark of an eternal present easy prey for the market and its mirages. In an eternal present the principal task of adolescents, finding their own identity, become impossible and the youngsters can only abandon themselves to an unlimited hedonism, enjoying themselves within the entertainment industry and finding their identity in the goods they consume (clothes, music, phones, etc.). Moreover, the values of the current cultural system oblige them to be always the best and the happiest. Few can be the best, while the others remain frustrated. The best as well are often frustrated because they cannot be themselves if constantly aimed at succeeding.<sup>14</sup>

Narcissistic pleasure and fun cannot last for long and even the attempt to augment the "dosage" is not successful because our body does not allow us to go beyond certain limits. Thus fun, after a while, gives place to boredom, indifference, and finally to frustration, apathy, and emptiness. This happens because the natural transition from "narcissistic libido" (the immediate and careless pleasure of childhood which invests individualistically on love of the self) to the "object libido" (the adult pleasure that comes from the transposition of enjoyment on objects compatible with the world, others, and especially with the self-preservation) does no longer occur.<sup>15 16</sup>

In this context, degrowth thinking could be very useful for new generations. However, it has to be adapted to their peculiar world. First, as adults, we have to recognize youth suffering and legitimize it. Youth suffering is, in fact, an understandable reaction to the huge cultural and economic crisis we are facing. Concerning nihilism, we have to explain it to youngsters, guide and help them watching it straight in its eyes: in this manner the lack of meaning could become an opportunity to construct a personal, subjective and relative thought.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it is necessary to explain that these crises are not necessarily inescapable, but are the unavoidable consequence of a "promethean" system, based on unlimited growth, that is undermining the planet we are living in as well as our wellbeing. Whereas a sustainable and happier world is possible (as degrowth theory demonstrates), if we know the causes of the destruction of our future, we can act to correct them and re-gain the ownership of our future. We can transform ourselves from an object exploited by the economic system to an active builder of a new and better world, where the desire of utopia, nowadays repressed, will be able to be released and guide us, resuming its critical role in driving human cultural evolution.<sup>18</sup>

If we have the tools and courage to face the reality, the latter transforms itself. "Our" crisis, thus, becomes an opportunity to understand ourselves and the world we face. We, therefore, return protagonists and ... utopia can become reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Aillon, J-L. *La decrescita, i giovani e l'utopia. Comprendere le origini del disagio per riappropriarci del nostro futuro*, Edizioni per la Decrescita Felice, Roma 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Cutler, D.M. , Edward, L., Glaeser and Karen Norberg, E., *Youth Suicide in the United States. Explaining the Rise in Youth Suicide*, Harvard Institute of Economic Research, Discussion Paper Number 1917, 2001.

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<sup>4</sup> WHO, *The Second Decade: Improving Adolescent Health and Development*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2001.

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