

Potentials of the degrowth debate for socio-ecological transformation

This paper is part of the special session: *“Exploring transformation to a Radical Alternative Gesellschaft (Radical Alternative Society): Economy, Ecology, Ethics”*. It is the basis for a 10-minute introduction to the theme of transformation as explicitly or implicitly used in the Degrowth literature. Its goal is to stimulate and guide the discussion of the following five questions in breakout groups:

1. Drivers: What is driving the current system?
2. Barriers: What are the barriers to transforming the current system to a more social ecological economy?
3. Subjects/Agents: Who needs to take action?
4. Means: How can change be achieved, what action should be taken by the agents?
5. Can the degrowth community form a synthesis for a radical alternative world view and how to achieve this?

Abstract Short

As the concept of socio-ecological transformation is increasingly gaining momentum in both academic research and policy circles, contributions from the degrowth debate come very timely. This paper analyses the recent developments in the degrowth literature, highlighting its visions as regards transformation, by presenting its ontological assumptions, actors and strategies, as well as proposed tentative transformation pathways. By bringing together radical social theory and collective political action, degrowth is better described as an attempt to repoliticise the debate on transformation. With respect to research, degrowth researchers not only conduct *“scientific analyses of societal transformations”* but also *“scientific analyses for societal transformations”*. More than just a critique to GDP growth, degrowth provides a fundamental questioning of many of the current dominant institutions, and offers a tentative vision for a post carbon, post growth society. Thus degrowth, in its broadest sense, aims at offering a new political project to trigger a process of societal transformation.

Abstract Long

The concept of transformation is central and explicit within the degrowth debate. As the closing phrase of the Declaration of the 2nd International Conference on Degrowth in Barcelona 2010 outlines, *“...the challenge now is how to transform, and the debate has just begun”* (Degrowth Declaration Barcelona 2010). How is this transformation to come about then? From a degrowth perspective, the object of transformation is the current (western) consumer-capitalist society, including its institutional structure and associated value system, i.e. the current capitalist (growth) social imaginary (Latouche 2010) and the domination of ‘economism’ (Kallis et al. 2009) in all spheres of social life.

Multiple subjects of transformation can be identified within the degrowth literature. The role of individuals, civil society and the state is considered more important and there is generally less faith in

market policies and reforms. The political subject of degrowth is not traceable along conventional lines of class, but consists of a greater alliance between activists, academics, practitioners, ecologically concerned citizens, unemployed and underemployed, and includes those struggling for environmental justice in the Global South (Martinez-Alier 2012), and peripheral North (Zografos 2013). Other actors include research institutions, civil society, social movements and even national governments, shaping the public discourse, creating spaces and experimenting with alternative institutional structures.

Respectively, the means of transformation, also referred to as “degrowth strategies” vary from oppositional activism to building alternatives and reformism from local to global levels (Demaria et al. 2013). Oppositional activism involves direct action by civil society such as demonstrations, boycotts, civil disobedience etc. that does not bring transformational change by itself, but can slow down unsustainable paths and raise awareness.

The building of solidarity economy alternatives, also described as ‘nowtopias’ (Carlsson and Manning 2010), refer to the creation of new institutions outside of present ones. Examples include cohousing projects, producer-consumer cooperatives, permaculture initiatives, ecovillages, open source technologies, non-monetary exchange systems etc. These examples contain seeds of a different culture and an alternative model of low scale, low-carbon economy, and society in practice that, overall, create a political proposal and not a blind return to an idealized past. Beyond the short term provisioning of specific needs, they help deconstruct the consumer-capitalist anthropological type and promote the creation of a collective political subject. Based on non-hierarchical structures and concepts such as solidarity, collectiveness and collaboration they create spaces of experimentation, building alternative structures and effectively creating a new model of societal organisation, while having the potential of changing values and perceptions. They do not provide a ready-made example, but provide existing examples that attract people open to new ideas, calling for the collective co-formulation of alternative proposals and life forms. Rather than seeking to first define and then make alliance with the subject that is relevant for degrowth, the basic idea is that by participating in such ventures, a new collective political subject is created.

A further strategy is the reform of current institutions to create the conditions for societal transformation. Some consider this as conflicting with the goal of degrowth as a revolutionary project. However we cannot escape the fact that a ‘degrowth society’ has to emerge from the current, capitalist, system (Boonstra and Joose 2013), so even a transformation must include steps of ‘revolutionary reformism’ (Demaria et al. 2013:207), i.e. a reformism that destabilizes hierarchical structures and opens spaces for radical new forms of social organization to emerge, creating in the process a new anthropological type. This closely follows Gorz’s (1967) idea of a non-reformist reform: “...while a reformist reform subordinates its objective to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system, a non-reformist reform implies a modification of the relations of power and implies structural reforms” (Muraca 2013: 166). Examples include environmental policies (resource and CO₂ caps, extraction limits), social policies (basic income, maximum income, social security guarantees, reduced working hours) and economic proposals (social enterprises and cooperative firms, ethical banks, environmental taxation), as well as an array of more radical proposals, such as the restriction on advertisement and the creation of commerce free zones (Jackson 2009, Johannisova et al. 2013, Kallis et al. 2013, Korten 2008, Latouche 2009, Speth 2012).

The 'limits to growth' debate has been going on (and off) since many decades. Original concerns, also leading to the idea of a steady state economy, focused on the biophysical limits to growth. On the contrary, the biggest contribution of the degrowth debate so far is not the recognition that there are biophysical limits. It is rather the increasing and explicit emphasis on the social consequences that this realisation entails and, at the same time, a call for how to make the 'inevitable' biophysical degrowth socially sustainable, between and within countries. Thus, here lies the invaluable potential of the debate: rather than individual environmental policies, increasingly rejected because of their 'cost on the economy' (Kallis 2011), degrowth offers a new narrative and provides a platform that would stimulate the creation of collective visions of a future that is simpler, but not regressive (Romano 2012). It offers a new political project to trigger the process of a democratic socioecological transformation.