
ESSAYS ON FRUGAL ABUNDANCE

DEGROWTH: MISINTERPRETATIONS AND CONTROVERSIES – PART 4 OF 4

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Growth is necessary to eradicate poverty in developed countries

This criticism suggests that by rejecting growth, we exclude the poor from progress. It is voiced as much by the Right as the Left. The former loves slamming ‘champagne socialists’ of the liberal elite for their ignorance of the lower classes; meanwhile, the latter defends the working class and social achievements, because it is their stock-in-trade. Therefore, the anti-globalisation organisation ATTAC also blames degrowth thinkers for not taking poverty into account in developed countries.¹ The issue of poverty in southern countries also raises criticism, which is differently argued, even though those two examples are often associated. We will tackle this objection further down. In both cases, the Right, which is largely responsible for this poverty and destitution, is no exception.²

To answer the criticism about poverty in developed countries, we need to refer to the Left’s compliance with our growth-driven society and denounce, once again, the trap of consumerism.

1) It is true that if we did not live in a growth economy, a consumer society, social democracy would simply not have been possible. The socialist movement (which includes the communist parties) would have been forced to start a revolution to lift the working class out of poverty.³ Historically, growth has enabled Western countries to avoid revolution, particularly after World War II. As a result, they have never seriously tackled the fundamental issue of sharing. Now, ecological constraints compel us to ask ourselves how to share a cake, which cannot and must not expand, and to wonder about the ingredients that go into the cake; moreover, we must acknowledge growth is also driven by the system’s vices: pollution, traffic jams, smoking, and alcoholism foster growth.

2) However, over the past thirty years (1974-2004, the Thirty Pitiful years, as regulatory economists say), GDP growth has not created jobs nor improved quality of life. By using the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare, Herman Daly has demonstrated that beyond a certain threshold, which we reached around the 1970s, the costs of growth (repair and compensation expenditures) were higher on average than its benefits.⁴ This strongly suggests, as Ivan Illich

1 Jean-Pierre Pollet, a journalist at *Imagine demain le monde* magazine, said that during an interview, the economist Stéphanie Treillet, one of the members of ATTAC, asked for more growth to finance the new economic directions made necessary by higher energy prices.

2 On 28 November 2009, in Aubervilliers (in the north-eastern suburbs of Paris), in front of the National Council of the conservative party (UMP), French president Sarkozy said: ‘When the Greens say they are going to campaign for degrowth, are they aware that there is unemployment? Are they aware that there is poverty in the world? Are they aware that close to one billion people go hungry, and that degrowth would imply more poverty for all these people?’

3 This issue gave way to a debate on degrowth in *TGV* magazine.

4 The index is defined by the following formula: personal consumption + public non-defensive expenditures – private defensive expenditures + capital formation + services from domestic labour – costs of environmental degradation – depreciation of natural capital.

once intuited, that frustration grows much faster than output.⁵ This is highly reminiscent of the fallacious and provocative expression that journalists used at some point for almost all developing countries during the 1980s and the 1990s: 'the economy is performing well, but the people are not doing well'.⁶ This issue is particularly topical in our globalised world, since the much talked-about trickle-down effect turned into a trickle-up effect – an increase in inequality, which accelerated substantially in developed countries. We are also witnessing a 'psychological impoverishment' in these countries. This is due to the increase in unmet needs, whether real or artificial.

3) If we shackle ourselves to the system's rules and consider that growth is an intangible entity, then we will find ourselves caught between two tragedies: on the one hand, we would have a growth society without growth accompanied by unemployment and societal distress, and the other hand, we would witness the destruction of the planet resulting from the same logic. Nevertheless, this is exactly what our opponents do: they want to apply old recipes, based on compromises which do not work anymore. Furthermore, we can no longer ignore the collateral damage those solutions inflict upon the environment. They say that our thoughts about ecological restraint may result in an increase in inequality and, by destroying jobs, higher unemployment.⁷

This is a complete untruth. If we keep believing in the myth of growth, that is, today, a growth society without growth, then we will be forced to suffer austerity policies, which are the most unjust combination of wastage and shortage. Since we no longer have any other choice but to reduce our ecological footprint, we are engaged in a war for the survival of humanity; moreover, when there is a war, there needs to be rationing. When water becomes scarce, it will have to be rationed; consequently, a redistribution policy will be obligatory. There is already glaring inequality in the world today. Less than 20% of the global population consumes 86% of the planet's resources. We are convinced that an alternative society is possible, necessary, and desirable — a gamble degrowth thinkers are taking. Degrowth is also imperative to eradicate material and psychological poverty in developed countries. In fact, it may be our top priority. Therefore, we must liberate ourselves from growth's tyranny, allocate resources differently, and turn away from our unwavering faith in development, which has made us addicted to the drug of growth. Sharing limited material resources in a fair way is not austerity as conceived by governments but, rather, frugality. This does not rule out abundance if we manage to abandon the consumerist model and to determine what our 'true' needs are. It is, above all, about taking into account other forms of wealth besides material wealth.

We need to rethink our system of values. Material poverty and a certain sense of restraint were seen as positive values for many centuries. The 'economicisation' of the world is responsible for

5 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, New York, Harper & Row, 1973.

6 'Le Japon va mieux, les Japonais moins bien', *Le Monde de l'économie*, 18 November 2003.

7 A journalist from the Brussels daily *Le Soir* once asked Serge Latouche: 'Can one reduce production and consumption, and also organize a degrowth society, without destroying our social model?'

the appearance of poverty as we know it today in many parts of the world. Moreover, such extreme poverty has nothing in common with the convivial poverty experienced by pre-industrial societies, as shown by Majid Rahnema in his 2003 essay.⁸ If we could control our needs, our lives would be the richer for it. The need for ostentation, pomp, or celebration is not to be denied. It will be the task of future degrowth societies to create new forms of luxury in order to address this need, without ruining the planet or forcing part of humankind into servitude and destitution.

How to solve the issue of poverty in developing countries through degrowth

It is the very same people who cannot imagine eradicating poverty without GDP growth that put forward the argument whereby growth is a necessary step toward solving the problem of poverty in developing countries.⁹ Yet teaming up with the latter are those who think degrowth could be achieved, at most, in developed countries but not in the developing world, still free from mass consumption.¹⁰ Developing countries should continue their economic growth policies, and even implement them if it is not already the case. The objection comes from the Left but also from charitable souls on the Right. The former are honest and the latter cynical, as they wish to keep exporting our factories, our GMO-filled, production-based agricultural model, and to keep plundering Africa and South America's natural resources for the sake of development. This last point is less about advocating growth in developing countries than developed countries for the best interest of the developing world, thanks to the so-called *trickle-down effect* – i.e. the hypothetical benefits of Northern growth for the people of the South. For a long time, this was the International Monetary Fund's and the World Bank's position.

Albert Cossery sums it up quite well in his critique of the Baroque 'economic expansion' peddled by Western technocrats: Behind this spell hides the former colonialists' attempt to perpetrate their crimes by spreading their consumption psychosis among healthy people. These people did not need to own a car in order to attest to their time on Earth.¹¹ The 'benefits' of this growth that under-developed countries supposedly lack have to be debunked again and again. Degrowth was born of both the obligation to create a partnership able to solve the issue of global inequalities, and criticism of the relationship between developed and developing countries.

8 Majid Rahnema, *Quand la misère chasse la pauvreté*, Paris, Fayard/Actes Sud, 2003.

9 Stéphanie Treillet also claims that growth is essential if the two thirds of humankind that live on less than two dollars a day are to be lifted out of poverty.

10 This is the idea defended by Jean-Marie Harribey (who is, by contrast, far more critical of growth in the North) and by the mayor of Bordeaux, Alain Juppé, who stated the following during the Copenhagen Summit: 'Should we go for degrowth? I think growth is necessary in poor countries, but a form of degrowth has to be considered in places where there is waste.' (4 December 2009).

11 Albert Cossery, *Une ambition dans le désert*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, pp.15-16.

1) Is degrowth a wise choice for developing countries, since it has not yet seen growth (or, in any case, it has not yet properly 'benefited' from growth)?

On the face of it, we might honestly think it is an aberration. And yet, asks Hervé René Martin, what better hope is there for the people of the developing world than a decrease in GDP? An increase in GDP would only indicate how much damage is being done. The more the GDP increases, the more the environment is destroyed, men are alienated, solidarity abandoned, and the more our simple yet efficient techniques and traditional know-how are forgotten. For people in poor countries, degrowth would thus mean preserving their natural heritage, abandoning sweatshops to revive subsistence farming, craftsmanship, and small trade, and controlling their own destiny.¹² For their part, Matthieu Amiech and Julien Mattern observe that pushing the developing world to mass consumption is quite like hypocritically wondering how to cram the maximum number of people into a sinking ship instead of trying to avoid the looming disaster.¹³

'Degrowth' may not be the best word, nor does it go down well when trying to gain the support of people in some financial difficulty. Yet advocating for growth and development in 'poor' countries appears as a huge compassionate sham, or even a crime. Yves Cochet and Agnès Sinaï point out that it would be like fighting fire with fire to advocate perpetual growth no matter how mismatched it might be with the countries concerned, and without thinking ahead to the possible environmental impact.¹⁴

2) We should stress that the degrowth programme was designed in the best interests of the developing world, especially Africa. The idea of an autonomous, frugal society came about from criticism of development by a small, international group of anti- or post-developmental theorists with Ivan Illich at its core.¹⁵ Illich had come up with the very pertinent notion of 'modernised poverty' as created by development and growth. 'It is true that the poor have a bit more money, but they can do less with their pennies' says Illich. 'Poverty itself is modernising: the monetary level that defines it is going up because new industrial products are considered basic needs while remaining out of the reach of most (...). In the Third World, the poor farmer is chased off his land by the green revolution. He earns more by working on someone else's farm, but his children no longer eat as well as they used to'.¹⁶ Poverty is turned into destitution through the destruction of the traditional family production unit of those who live simply.¹⁷ Poverty was traditionally characterised by the absence of that which is unnecessary; destitution is the inability to provide for all the necessities of life.

12 Hervé René Martin, *Éloge de la simplicité volontaire*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007, p.190.

13 Matthieu Amiech and Julien Mattern, *Le Cauchemar de Don Quichotte. Sur l'impuissance de la jeunesse d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, Climats, 2004, p.88.

14 Yves Cochet and Agnès Sinaï, *Sauver la terre*, Paris, Fayard, 2003, p.103.

15 Jean-Pierre Berland et al, *Défaire le développement, refaire le monde*, Lyon, Parangon, 2003.

16 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, op. cit., 1973, p.103.

17 As shown by Majid Rahnema, follower of Illich, in his book *Quand la misère chasse la pauvreté*, op. cit.

Authors of these critical theories became increasingly interested in alternatives to the impossible, or disastrous, growth-oriented society created by developing countries: self-organisation, make-do, and the informal economy. In the outskirts of cities people lead a precarious, though decent, life thanks to relational strategies based on generosity and reciprocity.¹⁸ These theorists were of course also interested in alternatives found in developed countries, such as LETS (Local Exchange Trading System), *Repas*, *Banche del tempo*¹⁹, cooperatives, and so on, but not in a societal alternative. Because of the environmental crisis, the emergence of globalisation, and the worldwide sustainable development sham, we need to come up with an alternative to the mainstream model, now more than ever. Degrowth came to address this need because it learned its lessons from theories critical of development in the South and from instances of survival outside of economic totalitarianism.

3) As for Africa, the use of the word 'degrowth' is not appropriate since the decrease of its environmental footprint is neither necessary nor desirable (this is also true of its GDP). This should not lead us to conclude that a growth-oriented society has to be implemented there. Degrowth is a matter of concern for developing countries only to the extent of their involvement in creating growth-oriented economies. It may prevent them from getting mired in quicksand. Societies of the developing world should, if there is still time, seek to 'untangle' themselves: i.e. get rid of the obstacles put on their path to self-realisation. Africans are better at surviving extreme conditions than we are. They are, in a way, better armed to deal with the future after the predictable collapse of the global market society. Moreover, the inevitable decrease in the movement of goods due to the rise in transport costs, or even the abandonment of air transport, will lighten the weight of globalisation on Africa. This will likely create areas of autonomy.

However, it is obvious that any type of alternative in the developing world can only be achieved through degrowth in developed countries. If we are able to maintain our lifestyle today, it is because most of humankind is frugal. Thus, we need a massive rebalancing of the drawing rights on the biosphere by reducing the environmental footprint of developed countries in order to enable those in the developing world to increase theirs. As long as Ethiopia and Somalia are forced to export feed for our domestic animals during famines, and as long as we keep fattening our cattle with soya meal obtained from the ashes of the Amazonian rainforest, every attempt by the developing countries to achieve actual independence and frugal abundance will be cut short.

The developing world must dare to degrow in order to try and break with its economic and cultural dependency on the developed world. It is about resuming a history interrupted by colonisation, development, and globalisation. It is also about redesigning, rebuilding, and reclaiming their cultural identity, reintroducing forgotten or abandoned know-how, techniques and products, as well as 'uneconomic' values deeply intertwined with the roots of these countries. If, driven by a desire for justice, we really want to go beyond the necessary reduction of our environmental footprint, perhaps we should consider paying an 'historical debt' as well as

¹⁸ See my 1998 book *L'Autre Afrique. Entre don et marché*, Paris, Albin Michel.

¹⁹ Original Italian type of service exchange network. See Rosa M. Amorevole, *Banca del tempo. Istruzioni per l'uso*, Bologna, EMI, 1999 and Paolo Colluccia, *La Banca del tempo*, Turin, Bollati, 2001.

an environmental debt. This is the debt incurred by imperialism. Its 'repayment' is sometimes claimed by indigenous people, who use the term 'to make restitution'. The restoration of lost honour (the return of plundered cultural heritage is more problematic) could consist in creating a degrowth partnership with the long-term objective of environmental convergence.

On the other hand, maintaining (or worse, introducing) the idea of growth in developing countries, allegedly in order to get it out of the poverty that very same growth creates, can only westernise it further. In any event, an alternative to development, in the South as in the North, can neither be an impossible step backward nor the mandatory adoption of a uniform 'no-growth' model, i.e. a society with no growth. For the excluded and the shipwrecked of development, it can only be a kind of synthesis between lost tradition and unattainable modernity. The duality of the challenge is well illustrated by this paradoxical formula. We can count on the incredible variety of social innovation to face it, once creativity and ingenuity are freed from the *economicist* and *developmentalist* straitjacket. Post-development means seeking collective fulfilment in many ways. It is no longer solely about material wealth, which destroys both the environment and social ties. The ultimate goal of having a good life varies according to context. Put another way, it is about rebuilding and rediscovering new cultures. The shape of this 'well-being' will depend on local traditions. It can be called *umran* (self-fulfilment), a word used by Ibn Khaldun; *swadeshi-sarvodaya* (improvement of social conditions for all) used by Gandhi; *bamtaare* (collective well-being) as per the Toucouleur of Senegal; *Fidnaa/Gabbina* ('radiance of a well-fed and worry-free person') used by the Borana of Ethiopia, or simply *Sumak Kausai* (to live well) used by the Quechua of Ecuador.²⁰ What matters is to declare a break from the systematic destruction perpetuated for the sake of development or, more recently, globalisation.

What about newly industrialised countries such as China, India, and Brazil?

Our societies must degrow, yet there are other countries still eager to see their economy grow and living standards rise. This is especially true of newly industrialised countries, the so-called emerging countries with two-figure growth rates, such as China, India, or Brazil. They have absolutely no intention to limit their economic growth and energy consumption, and are striving to live as well as we do. Is this dangerous? Are they to be considered a global threat? Should we not convince or even force them to implement degrowth? If we do not, all our efforts in France or Europe to reduce our environmental footprint will come to naught because of the annual 10% growth of these new tiger economies.²¹

20 Gudrun Dahl and Gemtchu Megerssa, 'The spiral of the Ram's Horn: Boran concepts of development', in Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (ed.) *The Post-Development Reader*, London, Zbooks, 1997, p.52 onwards.

21 Objection raised by Pascal Canfin, *L'Économie verte expliquée à ceux qui n'y croient pas*, Paris, Les Petits Matins, 2007.

The implementation of degrowth in a single country proves to be even more of an issue than creating a socialist national order. We must not get discouraged by the inaction of others; giving in to despair is too easy. We must take the lead so that others may join us if they so wish. The frugal abundance utopia is a driving force to set everybody in motion.

Of course, our difficult but ultimately successful efforts to infect the rest of the world with the virus that is economic growth (through the Opium Wars and half a century of communism in China, and at least a century of colonisation in Africa, India, Brazil etc.) make change difficult. The West despaired that capitalism would ever catch on in China and it now appears to some as a disaster, even though we did our utmost to get this result. The recklessness shown by those responsible for the spread of the plague is beyond all measure. The colonisation of the collective imaginary remains the biggest achievement of the western world, and will be its greatest tragedy. Apart from a few 'surviving' indigenous peoples (375 million strong) and some refusenik minorities in the developing world who reject growth and development, the vast majority of the world population longs for the living standards and lifestyle of the United States (understandably so). Of course, extending the American Dream to include the whole world is impossible. Every step in that direction would bring the death of our ecosystem ever nearer. Westernising lifestyles on a global scale would inevitably take us to the brink of collapse.

First, it is clear that China's economic growth is a global issue. China is not yet the world's biggest polluter, even in absolute terms, but it has been the world's biggest greenhouse gas producer since 2010; and judging by its current growth pace, it will soon beat all the records. And yet, in relative terms, China still lags far behind the U.S.: in 2004, its ecological footprint per capita was estimated at just one planet's worth of resources and was about six times smaller than that of its competitor. Nevertheless, China is already the world's factory. Would it not be immoral, not to mention very difficult, to impose anything on the Chinese against their will? The Chinese rising classes (as many as 100 to 200 million people) aspire to own cars and to enjoy the wild wastefulness of Western consumerism; and this aspiration is all the less reprehensible since we are primarily responsible for it. What's more, we keep on supporting it: General Motors and Volkswagen are planning to manufacture three million vehicles a year in China in the coming years and Peugeot is following the trend with huge investments, for fear of being left out. We have not yet embarked on a path toward a self-sufficient and sustainable society ourselves - a possibly happy but necessarily frugal society in terms of material goods. So let us start setting an example before we lecture others.

In any case, the fate of the world and of humanity depends very much upon the decisions of China's policy-makers. They are aware of the current ecological disasters and the very concrete threats which are weighing on their future (and ours). They also know that the ecological costs of their growth cancel out or exceed the benefits in the ecological balance sheet (even though those who receive the dividends are not bearing the costs). This is a rather good sign, even though the government decided not to publish the green GDP figures, which revealed negative growth in many regions. For the vast majority of Chinese people, their country's economic growth is as catastrophic as at the beginning of industrial capitalism in England two centuries ago. Hundreds of millions of farmers left their land and crammed in appalling conditions into the outskirts of over-polluted cities. About two million people attempt suicide every year in China

and at least 300,000, of whom 150,000 are women, succeed. Every two minutes, a Chinese woman commits suicide.²² Rates are three times higher in the countryside than in towns: 58% of the suicide victims used a pesticide. This is the greatest human catastrophe in history. According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 20% of Chinese people suffer from depression and 100 million from a major depressive disorder.²³

According to the Stern Review, China has already adopted very ambitious domestic goals to reduce energy used for each unit of GDP by 20% from 2006-2010 and to promote the use of renewable energy. In 2010, uncooperative factories were abruptly shut down.

India is in the same situation and launched an Integrated Energy Policy for the same period to increase energy efficiency. There, the alarm was raised a long time ago.²⁴ Many elites are perfectly aware of the environmental issues at stake. There are genuine environmentalist movements and fierce struggles against dam projects or new industrial establishments.²⁵

We need to embark on the path towards degrowth ourselves, so as to demonstrate that this is an enviable and therefore exemplary 'model'. This is the best way to convince not only the Chinese but also the Indians and the Brazilians to change course, while giving them the means to do so, in order to save humanity from a tragic fate. Such an approach, combined with their ancient tradition of wisdom, far removed from the Western rationality and lust for power, would allow us to hope that the Chinese people will not go all the way to the growth impasse we are about to reach.

There is no reason to be too pessimistic about India and China, because their cultural *fundamentals* remain very different from ours. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and even Confucianism promote self-control and moderation, and their traditional values correspond perfectly to the underlying philosophy of a society of frugal abundance. We find the same degrowth message in Gandhi's work. His maxim 'live simply so that others may simply live' continues to guide all objectors to growth.²⁶

22 Le Quotidien du peuple, 24 November 2003, quoted by Silvia Pérez-Vitoria, *Les paysans sont de retour*, op. cit., p.116.

23 Bernard Stiegler, *Economie de l'hypermatériel et psychopouvoir*, op. cit., p.15.

24 Nicholas Stern, *The Economics of Climate Change. The Stern Review*, executive summary, Autumn 2006, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.24.

25 It is not by chance that one of Vandana Shiva's books was published in French under the same title as our first book about degrowth, *Survivre au développement*.

26 Gandhi also said: 'The summit of civilization is linked to a long Indo-Buddhist tradition of aparigraha (non-possessiveness) and is therefore not to possess and always accumulate more but to reduce and limit one's needs'. Quoted in Robert Vachon, 'Le terrorisme de l'argent (II)', *Interculture*, October 2005, no. 149, Montreal.

Which 'subject' will implement such a project and make it a success?

Degrowth has no historical subject to undertake it. It is said to be nothing but a utopia without future, with no chance of being implemented because it lacks the agent capable of doing so. And indeed, who will support such a project? Working people, farmers, the middle classes, the liberal elite, social deviants, women, sexual minorities, or marginalised developing countries?

From Marxism, and more specifically from the eschatological vision of class struggle, we have inherited the conception of a historical subject taken up from Hegel. The people, or the oppressed social class, as the privileged protagonist of the drama, are the ones carrying the fate of humanity during any given period. According to Marx, the dynamics of history are based on the antagonism between social classes. In his opinion, the driving force behind capitalism is the conflict of interest between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The accumulation of capital reinforces and unites the proletariat, which becomes aware of its situation, strength and mission, evolving from a class *in itself* into a class *for itself*. The proletariat is the last class in history; it embodies universality and its historical mission is to lead a revolution, overthrow the bourgeoisie and establish a classless society: communism.

After the failure of the proletariat and even before the collapse of the existing socialism, the Hegelian-Marxists went looking for another historical subject. Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein and a few others suggested, in their supporting the Third World, this was the role of the 'proletarian nations'. Herbert Marcuse nominated the marginalised and the excluded, 'the bearers of negativity'. More recently, sociologist Paul H. Ray revived Karl Mannheim's vision of the footloose intellectual and insisted on the importance of the 'cultural creatives', an idea also developed in France by Patrick Viveret. Richard Heinberg wrote: 'These are people who typically espouse ecology and feminism while questioning globalisation and the power of big corporations. It is conceivable that this constituency group, if united and mobilised, could press for sensible energy policies'.²⁷ In this case, the subject would be a member of the elite and would lead a revolution from the top.

Nevertheless, these makeshift solutions, with the exception of the last one, have become less and less credible over time. Degrowth has put itself forward as an alternative to our growth society and to globalised capitalism; and those nostalgic for the ideal revolution now demand that it designates the subject who could put the idea into practice. According to ecological critics, the victim is truly universal: humanity. Having bid farewell to the working class, to quote the title of one of André Gorz's books, or having witnessed the last days of the working class (another one by Aurélie Filipetti), we are back to square one, so to speak: young Marx's generic human being.

In response to the question 'what social forces currently bear within themselves the possibility of an alternative? Or is it the very idea of a connection between an alternative and specific social forces that is wrong?' Cornelius Castoriadis answers: 'that idea is in effect mistaken, at least for modern societies. It is out of the question today to claim that the "proletariat" is historically destined to transform society... At present, if we are to transform society, the whole population

²⁷ Richard Heinberg, *The Party's Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Society*, op. cit., 2005, p.208.

must participate, and the entire population may be sensitised to that exigency — except perhaps some 3 to 5 per cent of diehards'.²⁸

This answer echoes our own.

However, this subject is far too abstract to form a party capable of launching an attack on the Winter Palace; and if, at a pinch, humankind can be considered a subject *in himself/herself*, the rather chaotic dynamic of globalisation does not seem to make him/her a subject *for himself/herself*. Humanity has never been so fragmented. It is true that in some developing countries there is widespread environmental awareness, and not only amongst the indigenous people. But the Western masses have probably been exposed too long to the growth virus and to (ultimately legitimate) consumerist aspirations to embark on a real crusade against the growth society and economy. Like us, the neo-Zapatista have opposed global uniformity, the result of globalisation, and the 'totalitarian extension of market logic to *every aspect of life*'; they have denounced the 'globalisation of commodities' which has become the 'commodification of the globe'.²⁹ And in doing so, they too have faced, in practice this time rather than in theory, the challenge of presenting themselves as representatives of a 'global community'. It seems therefore that the subject is not so much a universal as a *pluriversal*, or even the *diversal* of our West Indian friends, most notably the writer Raphaël Confiant, that is to say, an irremediably plural subject. This is why Subcomandante Marcos, when talking about the fights led by the 'natives', likes to list the ethnic groups in question: 'Mazahua, Amuzgo, Tlapaneco, Najuatkaca, Cora, Huichol, Yaqui etc'.³⁰ The fight against neoliberalism – which we prefer to replace with a rejection of today's growth society – is seen as the unifying force which transforms humanity into a historical subject within the concrete diversity of the groups of victims. *Comandante-delegate zero* takes great delight in listing the movement's innumerable voices: that of the student, the neighbour, the teacher, the housewife, the employee, the unemployed person, the street merchant, the disabled person, the seamstress, the typist, the delivery person, the clown, the service station attendant, the telephone operator, the waiter, the waitress, the cook, the mariachi musician, the sex worker, the mechanic, the acrobat, the car washer, the indigenous person, the manual worker, the farmer, the driver, the fisher, the taxi driver, the knife grinder, the street child, the civil servant, the group of youths, the media worker, the self-employed professional, the believer, the homosexual, the transsexual, the artist, the intellectual, the militant, the activist, the sailor, the soldier, the sportsperson, the bricklayer, the market

28 Cornelius Castoriadis, *A Society Adrift. Interviews and Debates, 1974-1997*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2010, p.153. He adds: 'Another mistaken idea must be stressed, one that is deeply anchored in the "left": the idea that the poor are politically/historically on the right side. That's part of our Christian heritage. Logic and historical experience show that the very idea is absurd, and that the true "poor people" are rather inclined to kowtow to the dominant classes.'

29 Jérôme Baschet, *La Rébellion zapatiste*, op. cit., pp.109-111. 'And it wouldn't take much for the inhumanisation of commodities to become the inhuman commodification of man himself.'

30 September 1994 Declaration, quoted by Jérôme Baschet, *Ibid.*, p.255. See also my book *Sortir de la société de consommation*, op. cit.

stallholder, the taco and sandwich seller, the windshield washer, the bureaucrat, the man, the woman, the child, the young person, the old person, the person we are.³¹

Bearing in mind our farewell to the working class and to the Third World, our answer to the recurrent question posed by our interlocutors, 'Who would be the subject undertaking the degrowth project?' runs along similar lines: the active subject transcends the diversity and infinite divisions of globalised humanity, for it is each and every one of us, collectively and individually. In these times of ultraliberal triumph, almost no-one can escape the folly of today's growth society. Humankind's instinct for self-preservation can now join the revolt.

When we maintain that degrowth is not an alternative but a matrix of alternatives, we do so out of a concern similar to that of the Zapatista, who seek to draw diverse elements together to form a coordinated whole. If they are to avoid destroying one another and the environment, it is in the interest of all human populations to reject today's growth society and federate their projects to build societies of frugal abundance, whilst nevertheless preserving their own specificity.

It is up to Westerners to lead the way. As the great Indian-Catalan theologian Raimon Panikkar says, Europe must contribute towards de-Westernising the world; and in some cases, paradoxically, it is the Europeans who must take the initiative with regard to the Westernised elite on other continents who, like *nouveaux riches*, are more Catholic than the Pope... Europe has experience of its own culture and has grasped its limits. It is therefore in a better position to accomplish this *metanoia* (regress/regret) than those who wish to enjoy the riches of European civilisation.³²

So far, we have not made a good start. There is still the problematic 'catastrophe doctrine' to speed up the process. There is neither eschatology nor historical necessity any more. Humanity, the victim, will never be the historical actor capable of triumphing over the mega-machine. Things could all go very wrong because if the system self-destructs, it could bring forth the very worst, or complete nothingness. As the rise of xenophobic movements in Europe shows, the risk of a 'war of the poor' breaking out and preserving the current oligarchies is not negligible. However, should a major crisis happen and leave the position of power occupied by transnational firms vacant for a moment, alliances within the *diversality* of struggles and initiatives could establish a new world. It is a long shot, but this is the degrowth gamble and it is worth a try.³³

31 Declaration of 16 March 2001, quoted by Jérôme Baschet, *Ibid.*, p.256.

32 'La Médiation européenne après un demi-millénaire', 1492-1992, *Conquête et évangile en Amérique latine. Questions pour l'Europe aujourd'hui*, Actes du colloque de l'université catholique de Lyon, Lyon, Profac, 1992, p.50.

33 'The forces that divide humanity are so powerful and the media-driven ideological illusionism so effective that this convergence (between the various oppressed parties) may never happen. But should it occur – as a result of unexpected and surprising circumstances, as history, especially in recent years, has always been capable of producing – it would very likely be explosive.' Jérôme Baschet, *La Rébellion zapatiste*, op. cit, p.130.

Will the change come from above or from below?

Moving away from today's growth society would involve great upheaval and, frankly, a revolution. But will this be led by the elite, or at least some groups of political and cultural elite, who are aware of the threats and necessities, or will it be driven by popular initiatives? Is it about conquering power through existing institutions or destroying it in order to regain control of our destiny?

The issue must be considered from a different angle in theory and in practice. Given what is at stake, on a practical level no means of action can be ruled out. Measures taken by current political leaders to limit damages done to the environment, however limited they may be, should not be disregarded, even though they are taken within the context of a *greenwashing* policy. However, in our developed countries, actions initiated at the lower end of the political scale seem more promising. Creating a political party to defend and institutionalise the degrowth system, when the conditions have not yet been met for a degrowth society to exist in the first place, would be premature. Moreover, it may lure us into playing *politics for politics' sake*, which means forgetting about social realities and focusing only on a political agenda. The illusion that getting involved in the electoral process would/can give us the power to enforce our vision (entering the electoral process and the delusion of power to enforce our vision) would be all the more questionable as the outdated model of nation-state countries is still in force, especially with a European Union of 27 countries. Electoral politics as it exists in our post-democratic countries has little effect on things that need changing; therefore it should be used with caution. In the best possible scenario, governments are only able to slow, moderate or soften processes over which they have virtually no control, if they even wanted to swim against the tide. Economic and financial oligarchies have regrouped to form a worldwide 'cosmocracy' which has the power, without even making any visible decision, to render politics meaningless and impose its will. Whether they like it or not, governments now work for big business and for the masters of the world's very own international organisation. Even in the opposition, politicians are inevitably attracted to the lures of political posturing and the never-ending cash flow that comes with the job. This temptation may be one of the reasons for the pathetic and disastrous decay of the French Socialist and Green parties as well as of the entire far Left. The issue of regaining control over unbridled productivity is eclipsed by political skullduggery, ego-driven quarrelling, candidates backstabbing one another or ideological righteousness used as an excuse to justify exclusions from the party.

It seems more important to us that a profound self-transformation be achieved by individuals and society at large than to worry about strategies regarding forthcoming elections. Local change can be brought by Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS), Community-Sponsored Agriculture (CSA), alternative currencies, virtuous, slow or transitional post-carbon cities etc. Even taking control of certain institutions can be one of many steps on the road to imposing degrowth at the top of the political ladder. One should not conclude that we advocate for abstentionism or that we turn our backs on concrete decision-making. However, we believe it is more useful for us to influence the debate, to put certain ideas under pressure, to make sure other ideas are taken into account. By doing so, we do our share to make mentalities change, which has been the main objective of objectors to growth so far.

Nevertheless, in some developing countries, the future seems brighter. People begin to speak up against growth and consumerism. The rejection of the Western development pattern and the acknowledgment of traditional Indian societies and their sets of values are the first signs that people in the developing world are reclaiming their imaginations. It also constitutes a first step towards the end of the Western economic stranglehold. The new constitution adopted in Ecuador on 28 September 2008, does not aim at having the highest possible GDP per capita; instead, it aims at respecting the indigenous ideal of *Sumak Kawsay* (in Quechua) or *Suma Qamaña* (in Aymara), that is the *buen vivir*, living life to its fullest – in other words, the good life, as Raúl Zibechi explained.³⁴ Article 275 explains that it applies to ‘the organised, sustainable and dynamic group of economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental systems’. In both Ecuador and Bolivia, nature is defined as a subject of law, which is a great disappointment for foreign mining companies whose most precious wish is to exploit the local natural resources. Article 71 of the Ecuadorian Constitution states: ‘Nature, or *Pacha Mama*, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes.’ Water is declared a common good, a vital element for nature and humankind. It is therefore an inalienable heritage which belongs to everyone and cannot be subject to privatisation. Nearly all of these principles were used by Evo Morales when he stated his own ‘10 commandments’ at the third Americas Social Forum. The concept emerges from an indigenous philosophy, as Bolivian activist Oscar Olivera puts it: ‘Water is a gift from the great creator god Wirakocha, who fertilises Pacha Mama (*Madre Tierra*) and makes life possible’.³⁵ The same applies to land and biodiversity. The industrialist, predatory conception of battling against nature withers and leaves way to a quest for autonomy, food sovereignty and energy independence without upsetting the ecological balance. The mobilisation of a few indigenous groups for the safeguard of Yasuni National Park inspired the Ecuadorian government into adopting the controversial Yasuni-ITT Initiative, named after the three oil wells located in or around the Yasuni National Park: Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini. It consists in preventing oil drilling in the region and creating a compensation fund financed by Western countries and companies to gather compensation worth 50% of the oil wells’ estimated profit rate. The initiative’s consistency with the fight against climate change saw a positive reception first in Germany, then in several other

34 Entropia, no. 9, autumn 2010, p.28.

35 Associazione Yaku, *La Rivoluzione dell’acqua. La Bolivia che ha cambiato il mondo*, Rome, Carta, 2008, p.25.

European countries, including France and Spain.³⁶ These decisions show what the indigenous philosophy is about: refusing to separate nature from culture and allowing them to perpetuate.³⁷

The neo-Zapatista 'revolution within the revolution' paved the way for change in Latin America, so much so that the evolution of this region during the next decades may influence humankind's destiny by going beyond the age-old issue of seizing power. It was made clear by the Zapatistas in the Mexican state of Chiapas that if you have enough imagination, ingenuity and boldness, many things that seemed impossible become possible.³⁸ Subcomandante Marcos also supported this idea, saying that a movement which claimed to use masses, the proletariat, peasants and students to seize power and bring them happiness, progressively evolved into an army which was devoted to the well-being of communities. Being in contact with the native populations has been reeducating it much more efficiently than the electric shocks that pass as therapy in mental institutions.³⁹ From its very first declaration in the *Selva Lacandona*, the ELZN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) rejected the seizure of power by the revolutionary army. This showed a first break with the Latin American tradition, a break that would persist and develop over the years, as it appeared in the many Zapatista declarations, including one made by Marcos on 2 February 1994, when he was asked about his movement's goals: not seizing power, but something even harder to win: a new world⁴⁰, a world in which many worlds fit.⁴¹ This conception was shared by the Aymara leaders who fought the 2000 Cochabamba Water War. The popular uprising in 2000 provided the world with the ability to see that we are capable of changing the course of our lives. We made ourselves heard by organising and mobilising, and so without creating a political party or trying to get elected and take power, we overcame our fear and regained a voice.⁴² In this new approach that shares the degrowth movement's concerns about autonomy, civil society has to control and exert pressure on the political authorities so

36 At the end of 2009, the NGO Forest Coalition also reported that the rights of the indigenous peoples had not been respected and that the payments had created conflicts and divided people. By operating a deep change in our consciences and in the way we see the world, these commercial aberrations should be replaced by a will to preserve our common goods. In the end of 2009, the NGO Forest Coalition also reported that the rights of the indigenous peoples had not been respected and that the payments had created conflicts and divided people. By operating a deep change in our consciences and in the way we see the world, these commercial aberrations should be replaced by a will to preserve our common goods.

37 See the work of Philippe Descola, particularly *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris, Gallimard, 2005), and Michaël Singleton, 'Un anthropologue entre la nature de la culture et la culture de la nature', in *Savoirs et jeux d'acteurs pour des développements durables* (ed. Debuyst, F., Defourny, P. and Gérard, H., Louvain-la-Neuve, Bruylant, 2001).

38 Sub-comandante Marcos, ed. Jérôme Baschet, *Saisons de la digne rage*, Paris, Climats, 2009, p.155.

39 Sub-comandante Marcos, 'Comment tout a commencé', in *Saisons de la digne rage*, p.11.

40 Jérôme Baschet, *La Rébellion zapatiste*, op. cit., p.65.

41 Sub-comandante Marcos, *Saisons de la digne rage*, op. cit., p.86.

42 Associazione Yaku, *La rivoluzione dell'acqua. La Bolivia che ha cambiato il mondo*, op. cit., p.12.

that they address popular grievances. By refusing power, the poor become powerful and manage to be heard without taking the risk of being betrayed.⁴³

⁴³ Majid Rahnema and Jean Robert, *La Puissance des pauvres*, Paris, Actes Sud, 2008.

Conclusion

This series of essays has, of course, no pretensions of actually putting an end to misunderstandings or objections, nor will it trigger the spiritual and behavioral revolution that is needed to achieve the concrete utopia of a society of frugal abundance. Firstly, it is because every question asked will lead to another. As the idea of a society of degrowth becomes more visible and credible, new issues, problems and obstacles arise. In the best-case scenario, we can hope that philosophical and ideological arguments will become secondary, thanks to a more precise positioning of stakeholders in the debates, which will make the talks more technical and political. Old oppositions may reappear, but in a different, indirect and renewed form. Once the project's relevance is established, there will be more and more talks about how it can be done, and most importantly how to realise such a wide shift from a society based on consumerism and endless waste to a society of frugal abundance. How do objectors to growth plan on financing retirement pensions or public debt? What do the thinkers of self-managed degrowth have to say about how a company should work, or what policy should be implemented for urban or rural development? How do they intend to limit the population without interfering with the well-being of families? How can grass-roots democracy and global governance coexist? What about gender perspectives? And also: when will all this become real? What stages will there be? How can negative side effects and institutional counterproductivity be prevented?

These questions are ubiquitous in the columns of specialised journals such as *La Décroissance* or *Entropia*, as well as of other periodicals or newsletters: *L'écologiste*, *Silence*, *Nature et progrès*. There are numerous websites or blogs devoted to the subject, and even an international forum (degrowth.org), on all of which one can have access to all debates regarding that matter.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, it will take more than convincing arguments to overcome the main obstruction to the achievement of a society of degrowth. Humankind is not only a rational animal; we are also a sensitive being of flesh and blood subject to passions. Even though the thinkers only address their readers' intelligence, they cannot ignore their emotions. They need to take them into account without falling into the trap of becoming gurus or prophets. Since growth society is based on a religious-like order, logical demonstrations and reasoning have little grip on the common person's faith. Each religion is built on *self-immunisation*, and that is all the truer for the religion of growth.⁴⁵ Knowing that, mass conversion is what we should also aim at. Would that imply creating a new religion, replacing the myth of Progress by other myths that would be as seductive and unrealistic? Some think so, say so or try to do so. This issue has been raised many times before. It appeared with the early days of the socialist movement, long ago. We know George Sorel's point of view about it. He thought that 'general strike' and 'the day of the revolution' were necessary myths for the evolution of the labour movement. Through the invention and dissemination of new tales, rituals and cults, the world would become magical again. Worshippers of Gaia have gathered to create cults and perform ceremonies that can

⁴⁴ All these debates can be found on or via Entropia magazine's website (www.entropia-la-revue.org).

⁴⁵ Gilbert Rist, *L'Economie ordinaire entre songes et mensonges*, Paris, Presses de Sciences-Po, 2010, p.195.

almost be considered religious, and so have certain advocates of *deep ecology*. And we know that the only difference between a Church and a cult is that a Church is a cult which has succeeded...

The challenge of degrowth is different. We have not become growth atheists, progress agnostics, skeptics of the cult of the economy cult just to turn into nature worshippers (even if it was re-baptised goddess Pacha Mama) or high priests of frugal abundance. Of course, we know that the world needs to become magical again, that scientific and philosophical debates need to gain in spirituality, but from our perspective, poetry, aesthetics and concrete utopia are sufficient to make us dream. In the history of every social group, committing to choices which, by definition, are uncertain, will prompt everyone's faith and convictions without the need to rig the debate by imposing a dogma beforehand. The way we see it, a utopia is not a myth. A myth is a trip out of reality that enables professional manipulators to lead hallucinated believers astray and use their legitimate aspirations. A concrete utopia is the creation of a future that is ideal, but always feasible. According to Daniel Payot, the fact that thoughts are filled with a desire for something 'feasible', such as a utopia, is what makes them connect to the world. And so, beyond, with or within the spectrum of what is directly real, without overlooking its crude reality, they make us 'see' the content and the concrete. This does not mean that we see the world for something it is not, but that we see it from a different angle, which uncovers new meaning and offers the possibility of new opportunities.⁴⁶ The challenge of degrowth is also a gamble on our contemporaries' maturity, on their ability to discover that there is another world within the one we live in. It is a risky gamble, but also a necessary one: it is a gamble that is worth the risk.

46 Daniel Payot, quoted in Cornelius Castoriadis, *Réinventer l'autonomie*, op. cit., p.54.