

Conference proceedings

Variants of De-Growth and Democratization within Democracy: A Conceptual Relationship

Konrad Ott

University of Greifswald, Germany

Institute of Botany and Landscape Ecology

ott@uni-greifswald.de

**2nd Conference
on Economic
Degrowth
For Ecological Sustainability
and Social Equity**

Abstract

The paper intends to determine the relationship between variants of degrowth and prospects for democratization. It outlines a Habermasian approach to environmental democracy that is in consistency with most variants of de-growth.

Keywords

Degrowth, sustainability, theory of democracy, Jürgen Habermas,

1 Introduction

It is a philosophical task to clarify concepts and to determine conceptual relationships. This task shall be performed in this paper. The relationship between an economic and cultural order beyond an orientation toward growth and a democratic mode of political governance should be analyzed in order to ask the question which combinations of de-growth orientation and democratic policy making might be feasible, attractive or even mandatory. Analysis is, first, about making explicit different conceptions of a) “de-growth economics” and b) the governance structure called liberal democracy which has been established in the national states that form EU. This structure must be determined to clarify the concept of democratization within democracy. By doing so, a set of combinations will be distinguished. Such distinctions and combinations might be helpful for internal debates in the political camp that favors de-growth and wishes further democratization of political life inside liberal representative democracies. Such distinctions might also be helpful for *external* perceptions of this camp – or might make it more difficult for other camps (liberals, conservatives, social democrats) to conceive a “de-growth democracy” as a horrible and nasty straw-man.

Thus, the paper distinguishes, first, some variants of de-growth from a more philosophical and ethical point of view, asking why one should engage in favor of a de-growth economics or society. This distinction is close to the contribution of J. van den Berg (see contribution this volume). Second, some concepts of democracy are distinguished. This is done in a manner Max Weber dubbed “idealtypisch” without any reference to empirical details of the roughly 130 full liberal or electorate democracies on planet Earth. The focus is on the states forming EU which are regarded as being decent liberal democracies (and not just nasty formal pseudo-democracies). Afterwards, a Habermasian approach of democratic life is taken into account more closely. At the end of this paper, third, some claims are stated. My basic claim is that rather modest variants of de-growth strategies and ambitious variants of democracy can, at least in theory, be conjoined to a viable and wishful political strategy for developed countries. I argue, that de-growth is not a threat to democracy and democracy is not a barrier against de-growth. Nevertheless, I wish to make some critical points against more radical variants of de-growth which may sound politically incorrect to some ears.

2 Variants of Degrowth

Most of us might value democracy for *intrinsic* reasons. This implies that democracy is not to be valued for its effectiveness, but as mode of political praxis. It is harder to value de-growth for intrinsic reasons, saying that society should opt for de-growth for the sake of de-growth. Whatever de-growth may be, it is, as many have argued at the Barcelona conference, not an end in itself. Most see it as a transition process to a steady state which is valuable in itself. If so, we have to look for sound extrinsic reasons for rejecting the (still pervasive, but meanwhile slightly scattered) economic and societal orientation at permanent high growth rates of GDP and consumerism. By doing so, we face different songlines of reasoning and variants of de-growth (DG).

DG-1: Here, degrowth is taken literally and refers conceptually to GDP. GDP-fixation is rejected. GDP is only one indicator of social welfare among many. In developed countries, other factors contribute more to the social welfare of average people than permanent growth rates of GDP. GDP is not a measure for welfare but for economic activity on markets only. This is a modest macro-economic claim that can be supported by Max-Neef’s threshold hypothesis (Max-Neef 1995) and recent findings about the economics of happiness. There are even some studies indicating that, at least in wealthy countries as Switzerland, participation in democratic life contributes positively to welfare. According to DG-1, growth rates of GDP should be seen relaxed with “Gelassenheit” (Martin Heidegger). In this interpretation, rates of GDP must not be permanently below zero. Therefore, the question does not occur whether degrowth implies growth

rates being negative without end. The advantage of DG-1 is to free us from GDP-fixation which might be continued if we horrify any growth of GDP. Personally, I would not like to exchange growth-mania by degrowth-fixation. DG-1 is quite modest a claim which might find support even among social democrats, conservatives, churches, and even among the camp of prudent economists. The problem is that DG-1 can be endorsed by different political camps. Even highly conservative-communitarian variants of DG-1 might be proposed which emphasize family values, engagement without payment, charity, modesty, and the like.

DG-2: Here, de-growth is seen as being mandatory a strategy in order to reach specific environmental goals that might be dubbed as “strong sustainable development” (Ott, Döring 2008), reduction of ecological footprint, or environmental justice. De-growth is a strategic mean on the pathway of sustainable development. As it has been argued in a broad scope of literature, permanent growth orientation can’t be a viable universal economic strategy since natural resources are limited, living systems are overused, the atmospheric sink of greenhouse-gases has been already filled up, and the impacts of growth upon both ecologic and human systems are repugnant. De-growth of developed countries might be seen mandatory if developing countries should keep some environmental space left for their economic development (which according to our moral hopes might benefit the poor strata in the global South). De-growth in the North might be a prerequisite for pro-poor and sustainable development in the South.

An even stronger variant of DG-2 sees de-growth as integral part of a global and general “contraction and convergence”-regime, as it has been proposed by eco-philosopher Károly Henrich (2005). Such regime limits the overall input in the economic sphere according to ecological constraints (“contraction”) and distributes the remaining entitlements for making use of natural resources more equally among humankind in the longer run (“convergence”). This inspiring proposal generalizes Aubrey Meyer’s climate-focused C&C-approach (Meyer 1999). If inherent moral value is attributed to natural beings the contraction must become more stringent than in an anthropocentric framework.

DG-2 is, ultimately, interested in impacts of economic growth and consumption upon both natural and human systems. It does oppose growth only in as far as such impacts occur. If such impacts could be avoided or reduced, growth of GDP can be tolerated. DG-2 supposes that growth of GDP can’t, as some theoretical models might suggest, come about with shrinking material input. The basic predictive assumption behind DG-2 is: “Dematerialization of economic performance is impossible”. Dematerialization of growth might be possible in pure economic theory but can’t be expected under real-world conditions. This assumption is often warranted by case-studies on rebound effects. The underlying assumption of DG-2 deserves attention beyond the opposition of theoretical modeling and rebound-effect-evidences. For instance, the gains of a policy-driven innovation strategy toward “dematerialization mainstreaming” should be assessed, as it has been done by the German Environmental Advisory Council in 2008 (SRU 2008).

DG-3: De-growth is liberating our life from economic pressures and struggles. By doing so, degrowth is very likely to improve our overall quality of life. DG-3 is a strategy of cultural de-commodification, including new imageries of human flourishing. In combination with some assumptions about more equal schemes of how labor, income and wealth should be distributed, degrowth is promising for cultural life, including democratic political life. There would be many benefits of such de-growth to be registered in terms of patterns of mutual recognition, gender, education, health, political participation, family and community life, leisure and the like. Realizing all the gains of de-growth in more convivial, less commodified and less competitive ways, most people won’t miss growth at all. DG-3 is a recommendation of an Aristotelian orientation toward *eudaimonia*.

DG-4: Here, de-growth is seen as an integral part of an overall strategy to transform and eventually replace capitalistic modes of production (Marx: “Produktionsverhältnisse”) by other modes. This strategy is not restricted to growth-rates of GDP but it includes a transformation of property rights, of control over capital stocks, of tax systems, the role of markets and public services, investment controls, and the like. DG-4 does not only attack one misleading indicator for welfare, as GDP, but the basic economic structure

("system"). Of course, DG-4 comes in many variants which stem from different traditions in different countries (socialism, communism, anarchism, and so on). While DG-1, Dg-2 and DG-3 are also critical against neoliberalism in both theory (neoclassical growth-theory) and practice (deregulation, commodification) they ultimately remain reform-oriented while DG-4 is united under the claim that reforms and regulations won't suffice.

There is the presupposition in DG-4 that capitalism should be transformed (overcome, replaced) for some reasons. At this point, one might make some claims against alienation, exploitation, frustration, injustice, destructiveness, and the like. Moreover, there is the implicit assumption that there is no variant of capitalism that can be reconciled with DG-1, DG-2, DG-3 and basic ideas of political and distributive justice.

It is fair to say that there are many implicit assumptions in DG-4. Explicitness is required if DG-4 does not simply suppose that any political order whatever their details will be "better" anyway than industrial capitalism. Some explicit remarks of how a post-capitalistic and post-growth society should be institutionalized might be helpful for further debate on DG-4. Explicitness is also required with respect to concepts of democracy that are conjoined with DG-4. At the Barcelona conference, some persons argued in favor of "real" or "substantial" democracy while others talked about post-democratic regimes beyond liberal individualism. Here, explicitness is a requirement for discourse.

All four variants of de-growth clearly rely on extrinsic reasons. These ideal variants can be combined unless some combinations look incoherent. Personally, I endorse DG-1 with some emphasis. I also endorse DG-2, supposing that persistent growth of global GDP is incompatible with strong sustainable development on a global scale. By prudent de-growth strategies, developed nations should release opportunities for Southern nations for genuine sustainable development, including poverty alleviation. Developed nations can and should take the lead as environmental forerunners without further delay. According to DG-2, persistent high growth rates in large Southern countries are no-sustainable, too. DG-2 is mandatory unless societal practice gives reasons to assume that GDP can be further increased with far less impacts on nature. The burden of proof falls upon such optimism.

DG-3 hopes for convivial communities in which life can be enjoyed in togetherness (see contribution *Muraca*). I am sympathetic with DG-3 but DG-3 stand in urgent need of some reality checks. Convivial ways of life freely adopted by persons that have different sources of income are clearly to be welcomed. Moreover, the longing for community may motivate persons to engage in commonly shared economic projects eco-villages, cooperatives, co-housing initiatives, and the like. In principle, such projects can be initiated within current society. Such projects are to be welcomed, too. From an historical point of view, such DG-3-projects have been initiated since 1900 but they never became a mass-movement within society. Many of them failed. It is an empirical questions how many contemporary "DG-3"-experiments will fail or flourish. It is a political question how the legal order may become more supportive for "DG-3"-projects. We should search for best-practice-examples but should also well aware about the limitations of community-based DG-3.

DG-3 becomes more problematic if the ideals of convivial reciprocity are transposed on the level of society. If this is being done, DG-3 rests on some implicit anthropological and ethical claims with respect of how human might behave if de-growth becomes a societal reality. As we know since Ferdinand Tönnies' "*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*" (Tönnies 1887) the modern tension between the longing for community and the realities of societal life turns out to be a tragic predicament. Ultimately, society turns out to be the stronger force in the project of modernity. If expectations on human behavior are seen with more skeptical eyes, DG-3 loses credit. Why not assume that there will be more struggles, less solidarity, less conviviality, more distributional conflicts, increasing harshness in social relations, more cultural divides, even political unrest or raising support for right-wing parties? At the moment, it remains completely unclear what kinds of reliable social security will (not) emerge in de-growth societies. Hardly anybody would like to replace the welfare state by trust in conviviality. It is uncertain how patterns of recognition

will be affected by de-growth. All in all, DG-3 is far less risky on a project-level than on a societal level. If so, we should start DG-3 at the level of mutual recognition, convivial networks and on project-level. It is hard to imagine how society could become a large community.

Generally speaking, de-growth partisans should not underestimate the functions of GDP-growth has had for societal life after Second World War. In these decades, growth of GDP was functional for social peace and for a taxation by which infrastructures could be established (universities, courts, road systems, theaters, and the like). It was functional for transforming the more rigid class societies into societies in which the middle class was mainstreamed (until the 1980ies). De-growth theorists should think of some reliable strategies in finding functional equivalents for growth. We should critically model different de-growth scenarios assessing the impacts. Without such strategies and assessment, the hope for a renewal of cultural life in solidarity and community might be a noble dream that ignores a can of worms.

I do not endorse DG-4. My skepticism against DG-4 rests on a whole bunch of reasons, some of which are more theoretical ones, some rest in personal experiences I had with(in) leftist groups in Germany in the "red decade" of the 1970ies and, moreover, with the collapse of GDR-type of socialism in 1989 that left people and land in economic, cultural, and moral ruins. This more personal background may be seen as specific German bias which is unfair against other traditions (Italy, Spain, and France). Nevertheless, specific experiences may justify a certain degree of risk-aversion against new anti-capitalist experiments on a societal scale. The theoretical reasons are about deficits of DG-4 with respects to economy theory, theory of society, theory of democracy and even theories of justice. Such theoretical deficiencies can't be substituted by leftist rhetoric.

In rejecting DG-4, I have to assume that there is at least one variant of reformed and regulated capitalism that is compatible with DG-1, DG-2, and even DG-3. This variant could be the result of a "Green New Deal" which is not restricted to eco-efficiency but is more comprehensive in scope (Ott 2009). The final point I wish to make at the end of this section is that one can be a supporter of de-growth orientation without commitments to DG-4.

3 Democratization within Democracy

There are different types of democracy. I leave aside all so called electorate democracies that only fulfill some minimal requirements as periodical elections of the state's president. I also leave aside the problem of how fragile newly emerged democracies often are. I focus on Western political system which I regard (with some minor caveats) as being decent liberal democracies. Decent liberal democracies (DLD) grant a comprehensive system of rights to all citizens, including rights to participate in democratic life and to have access to education, health care, court, open spaces, and the like. Decent liberal democracies protect minorities and they provide fair chances for all political camps to come into government. Elections are fair in several respects. DLD encompass many specific checks and balances against the misuse of political power. Public opinion forming might be manipulated by mass media but it is not distorted by state's authorities. (I abstract away the special case of Berlusconi's nasty media-political system.)

DLD are committed to specific institutional arrangements, as constitutional law, rules and limits for majority voting, and principles, as, for instance, the basic neutrality of the state against lifestyles, religions, and comprehensive doctrines. Existing DLD rest on the following political ideals: a) sovereignty of the people, b) inclusion of all citizens as citizens, c) free and uncoerced deliberation of public matters. These ideas are yardsticks by which the many shortcomings of existing DLD can be identified. They are also orientations for further democratization within democracy. Democracy is never perfect ("Ecclesia est semper reformanda."). Can DLD be improved in ways that might be perceived as further democratization of already DLD's, say DLD*? Which political theories do present reliable outlooks on DLD*.

In theory, an outlook for DLD* might rely on the basic concept as democracy as "praxis", as Castoriadis (1975) has argued. Democracy, then, is far more than periodic elections and majority voting. It is seen as

genuine human enterprise of zoon politicon. (This concept does not rely on an idealization of Athen's ancient democracy which was highly "agonistic".) Democracy, seen as "praxis", rests on ethical ideas. In terms of action theory: Political agency can't be conceived in terms of instrumental rationality only but must be seen as contribution to such common enterprise guided by ethical ideas. My claim is that neither system theoretical approaches nor economic theories of democracy can provide outlook for DLD*.

In his "Faktizität und Geltung" (1992) Jürgen Habermas has outlined a theory of deliberative democracy that would be a variant of DLD*. It supposes a complex and robust model of the political sphere, entailing a) the hard core of the political system (parliament, government, administration, supreme courts, headquarters of parties, and the like), b) the soft communicative power of deliberating civil society, and c) intermediate zones of NGO's, scientific policy counseling, lobbies, boards of all kinds, and so on. Single citizens are to make public use of political reason within a commonly shared deliberative sphere called "Öffentlichkeit". Civil society ideally might perform itself as becoming a Kantian "Publikum" (Kant 1784).

Normatively speaking, it is the task of civil society to hold both expectations and pressure high on professional politicians. In the intermediate zones, there is much space for concerned scientists, investigating journalists, NGO-leaders, engaged intellectuals, dissenting voters, advocates for nature conservation, and the like. This space with its many specific arenas and media enables persons to take the role of critical intellectuals which contribute to political debates via newspaper, internet and so on. There is room for direct involvement of citizens (citizen's juries) by which an impact on politics can be established. In the core of political systems there are experts for legislation processes, assessment, and instrumental and financial implementation of policies. The political core of DLD can and should be augmented by further democratization.

The interplay between civil society, intermediate agents, experts, and professional politicians makes democracy "being alive". The quality of democracy can't be located at specific nodes of such network but must be determined how citizens make use of this network. (This network must be used continuously if it is to be kept intact.)

This general structure is, of course, fragile with respect both to DLD and DLD*. If civil society becomes tired of politics, if intermediate zones become occupied and controlled by mass media and industrial lobbies, if policy makers cynically adopt the schemes of commercial advertisement for electorate campaigns, if intellectuals escape in the realm of aesthetics, if dissenting votes are marginalized, and so on, even DLD might be compromised in the longer run. (Some evidence suggests that Italy has moved some steps back from DLD in recent years. This might also be true for the U.S. under the Bush-administration.)

All in all, the performance of environmental policies of existing DLD is better than those of electorate democracies or of authoritarian regimes. At the very moment, it is uncertain whether GHG-emissions will turn out to be a fatal exception from this overall picture. Environmental issues have been mainstreamed in recent years. It is here to stay. We shall continue mainstreaming our ideas in civil society hoping that political reforms can speed faster than urgent problems. This problem relates to problems of time, ethics, and policy-making that are beyond the scope of this presentation. Downplaying the problem of urgency with respect to climate change and the loss of biodiversity, general political constellations in DLD are not inimical against strong environmental reforms. A combination of sufficient lifestyles, new patterns of mutual recognition, support of civil society, and political reforms in order to create a strong influence on the economy are within reach. DLD can and should be transformed toward a more Habermasian DLD*. Conjunctions of such DLD* with DG-1, DG-2, and DG-3 situated on a project-level are close to concepts of deliberative environmental democracy (Dryzek 1990 Mason 1999).

Let us briefly consider some conditions that may be supportive for both DLD and such DLD* and de-growth orientation. Such conditions are:

Moderate economic inequality of citizens

Decent quality of life for all

Republican education

Awareness of gender biases in policy making

Recognition of different lifestyles within a constitutional framework

Participatory arrangements (citizens juries)

Increased interests in collective goods (as nature).

4 Final Claims

There are sound reasons for three variants of de-growth and there are reasons for democracy and for further democratization within DLD. All DG-variants and DG-strategies should fulfil the requirement that they should not compromise existing DLD and, moreover, might provide plausible outlooks for DLD*. Seen from the de-growth angle, both DLD and concepts for DLD* should be, in principle, compatible with DG-1, DG-2, and project based DG-3. The concept of Habermasian environmental democracy fulfils all these requirements. So, the conceptual relationship has been determined.

Therefore, I wish to propose and to entertain the following claims:

1. Further democratization within democracy is, in principle, compatible with a) less consumption of commodities, b) strong policies toward sustainability, c) less consumistic but more convivial lifestyles, and d) projects of alternative economics.
2. One should support the following conjunction: Habermasian DLD* & DG-1 & DG-2 & DG-3.
3. Further democratization within DLD and reform-oriented variants of de-growth provide a political outlook that should be critically compared to conjunctions of variants of DG-4 with concepts of democracy that supporters of DG-4 wish to propose. (Supporters of DG-4 should feel challenged.)

This position is on the green-left wing in the overall specter of political orientation but it looks somewhat "right-wing" in the specific DG-camp. Personally, I feel comfortable with this position hoping that it might be defensible in debates to come. Some political prudence might be more helpful for the de-growth movement in the longer run than radical chic.

References

Castoriadis, C., 1975, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris

Dryzek, J., 1990, *Discursive Democracy*

Habermas, J. 1992, *Faktizität und Geltung*, Frankfurt/M.

Henrich, K., 2005, Plädoyer für ein globales K&K-Regime, *Natur und Kultur* 6/2, 38-60.

Kant, I., *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung*, Werke XI, 53-61.

Mason, M., 1999, *Environmental Democracy*, London

Max-Neef, M., 1995, Economic growth and quality of life: a threshold hypothesis. *Ecological Economics*, 15, 115-118

Meyer, A., 1999, The Kyoto Protocol and the Emergence of 'Contraction and Convergence' as a Framework for an International Solution to Greenhouse Gas Emission Abatement, in: Hohmeyer, O., Rennings, K.: *Man Made Climate Change*, Heidelberg, 291-345.

Ott, K., Döring, R., 2008, *Theorie und Praxis starker Nachhaltigkeit*, Marburg

Ott, K., 2009, Es ist Zeit für einen Green New Deal, *Vorgänge* 186/2, 97-106

SRU (Sachverständigenrat für Umweltfragen), 2008, *Umweltschutz im Zeichen des Klimawandels*, Berlin

Tönnies, F. 1887, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Darmstadt 1979.



www.degrowth.eu