

Democracy and degrowth: some conceptual issues and real-life experiences

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Introduction

Degrowth is about reducing the 'size' of the economy and lowering levels of material consumption. However, the importance of **democracy as a process for achieving degrowth** is an equally vital aspect of the paradigm.

While degrowth supporters seem more keen on models of participative and direct democracy, the field remains rather **unclear as to which specific idea of democracy** it fosters.

Moreover, degrowth enthusiasts seem to shy away from considering the **challenges related to the use of democracy for achieving changes of deeply-embedded aspects of the current system**.

Questions & objectives

Research questions:

- **What kind of democratic processes and/or principles** can bring radical changes in behavior towards the ethics implied by the degrowth paradigm? (*theoretical lessons*)
- **How have some of these changes been brought about within western "democracies"** where individuals are so deeply influenced by materially intense lifestyles? (*empirical lessons*)

Objectives:

To provide a preliminary discussion of **some theoretical insights** as well as **historical and contemporary evidence** in order to find out what sort of democratic politics or political systems are necessary for achieving sustainable degrowth transitions.

A theoretical starting point

Dahl & Lindblom (1953) classically distinguished between democracy and polyarchy:

- *Polyarchy* is our system: it is not a single, monolithic elite that controls government and society, but a **series of specialized elites** that compete and bargain with one another for control. Within such highly unequal system, elections remain reasonably honest.
- *Democracy*, on the contrary, is a system in which **the electorate is truly "sovereign"**, meaning that: (1) its members are reasonably well informed about the issues to be decided by the political process and reasonably active in contributing to their resolution; and (2) there exists no stable minority class that is "privileged", meaning that such class possesses political power at least equal to that of elected officials and unmatched by any other stable group. Democracy in this sense cannot coexist with capitalism, a system characterized by class stratification.

Degrowth is thus only barely possible within today's capitalism because it can only be endorsed by citizens reasonably well informed about the socio-ecological issues at stake and reasonably active in contributing to their resolution, that is, by citizen unobstructed by a privileged class.

Various theoretical models of alternative politico-economic systems have been proposed. Degrowth supporters would gain from discussing them. They range from market-socialist models mimicking mechanisms of capitalist growth (Roemer, 1994) to radical (and utopian?) participatory planning (Devine, 1988; Albert & Hahnel, 1991). In the middle lies perhaps the solution, with models such as the one developed by Schweickart (2002), combining a true democracy with cooperatives operating in a regulated market setting.

State of war or state of squat?

- During WWII, the Roosevelt Administration used both **aggressive advertising** and **public policy instruments** to instigate citizen attitudes of resource conservation and waste reduction.
- Since 2002, the Can Masdeu squat in Barcelona hosts several **kitchen gardens** (that minimize energy waste from food transport); in this degrowth initiative, land resources are managed by means of participative politics.

This second initiative is a **bottom-up** initiative associated to grassroots movements critical of capitalism that seek to establish politico-ecological alternatives at the margins of this system. Conversely, the US case can be seen as a **top-down** initiative that generated social conditions necessary to pursue degrowth, while not questioning capitalism.

Interestingly, the first initiative promoted degrowth under **conditions of crisis** (WWII), while the second has emerged under broadly **stable socio-economic and political conditions**.

Conclusion

Future research should focus on:

- What and how politico-economic conditions stimulate people to engage into both "top" and "bottom"-driven degrowth activities?
- How important is scale in determining the politics of degrowth?
- In what way degrowth initiatives contain a critique of "polyarchy"?

References

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