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Degrowth: Philosophy and economy of an alternative

Estudiante: Diego Cobo López

Director: José Carlos Romero Mora

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CHAPTER I: AN INTRODUCTION TO ECOLOGICAL-TRANSITION THEORIES.

Climate change has been one of the most current topics in media, political debate and policy for decades. Defined as *“a change in the statistics of the atmosphere over decades. Such statistics include not just the averages but also the measures of the extremes of how much the atmosphere can depart from the average.”* (Dessler, 2016, p. 13). But that would not necessarily imply a problem, would it? So why do we worry about how climate change to such an extent when the definition seems so harmless? The reasons are myriad: unpredictability makes agriculture difficult (Since agriculture needs certain conditions to remain stable or predictable, and climate disruptions make these conditions harder to reach, which in turn makes crops fail or produce less) and puts global food supplies at risk, changes in average precipitations in certain areas create pressure on communities and force them to relocate or suffer various climate-related disasters (floods, droughts...), it affects eco-systems and food chains... (Murphy, 2021)

The problem there is quite clear, but some still would argue that human activity has little (if anything) to do with it since changes in the Earth’s climate are natural and have occurred several times in history. However, current scientific consensus would point towards the contrary. Human activity has likely caused the observed disturbances to climate and that said disturbances have grown rapidly and worrisomely in the past century, are accepted to be true statements, as the IPCC reports demonstrate (IPCC, 2021).

This is not a new reality, the scientific community has been aware of this situation at least since the XIXth century, although back then it was not considered to be a problem. It is only in the 50s and 60s that environmental problems start to become apparent (for example, air pollution in cities), and then environmentalism was born. But it was in the ’70s and 80’s that it took off with relative strength, the message arriving to more and more people, especially as the depletion of the ozone layer and acid rain were becoming hot topics in mainstream media (Dessler, 2016). At that very same time, the most polluting industries adopted the “tobacco strategy”¹

¹*consisting of the following steps:*

Its name comes from Tobacco companies using it in the 50s and 60s to stall legislation against their activities. Big oil and other polluting industries have been doing more or less since the 80s and 70s, and to some extent stalling climate action (Dessler, 2016). Of course, this has not been the only reason for climate inaction or for actions that do not address the problem properly (however, this notion – as we will see – is highly discussed), several ethical, political, and economic reasons have made it difficult to tackle climate change. For instance, a lack of international political coordination has squandered many initiatives (the Kyoto Protocol), since international actors tend to look for their interests and not all actors see the benefit of climate action, and some that do, do not have the means to do their share (Gardiner, 2006). And while this remains true, we have examples of international cooperation leading to effective climate action is not an impossibility or a myth it has been achieved with great success when it comes to the ozone layer. Indeed, the Montreal Protocol of 1987 saw the international community coming together and banning the use of Ozone Depleting Substances, hence allowing the Ozone layer of our atmosphere to start healing, avoiding great damage to life and the environment (Whitesides, G. 2020). But that is probably the only fully functional protocol so far.

We have, very briefly, looked into the problem. But this work aims not to sow despair or simply present the situation. Countless articles, books, documentaries, essays and various forms of media do so masterfully. The author aims to present the benefits and limits of an alternative, in this case, we will be arguing that degrowth theories offer

" Finding a small number of sympathetic scientists who would convey the message of doubt to the general public. Misrepresent this to suggest that there is a vigorous debate in the scientific community.

Cherry-pick data and focus on a small number of unexplained or anomalous details. Ignore the fact that the vast, vast, vast majority of data solidly supports the consensus view.

Create the impression of controversy simply by asking questions, even if the answers were known and did not support the tobacco companies' case.

Under the guise of fairness, demand equal time from media outlets to present tobacco companies' side." (Dessler, 2016, p. 215)

interesting insights into a wider solution to the climate crisis. To properly do so, we need to explore some of the main options presently debated amongst the climate academia, which is what we have called ecological transition theories. We will first divide them between market-oriented solutions and alternative solutions.

Market solutions, also called green capitalism, look to change the way the market economy works without seriously altering the basic precepts of capitalism. Such as maintaining the concept of private property but making it time-limited or advocating for technology-based solutions (Turnbull, 2015). This has been the case with ideas such as cap and trade or carbon taxes, sustainable development, and the concept of natural capital or “green growth” technologies (Meckling and Allan, 2020). Of course, all of these ideas have come under the fire of their critics, although some of them have also proven to work to some extent (Especially cap and trade and emission cuts for ozone-depleting gasses (Dessler, 2016). Some others, however, have seen their effectiveness under serious criticism, such as carbon tax and prices (Mildenberg and Stokes, 2020).

But we will focus this work on alternative solutions, of which scholars have proposed plenty in the last decades. For example, Eco-socialism which has been an increasingly relevant alternative in some academic circles (although there are several branches, some of which will be covered in this work), can be defined as any movement that shares "a commitment to struggling for a socioecological transition beyond capitalism by democratizing the means of production, subjecting markets to more ecologically rational planning, and subordinating private profit to social use-value and ecocentric production." (Albert, 2022, p. 2). This is a very broad definition, but it is only as broad as the myriad movements that have emerged in recent years to try and respond to the ecological crisis from a non-capitalist perspective.

All of these branches argue that capitalism has proven incapable (or unwilling) to act effectively to stop and revert climate change. And they propose various strategies to effectively fight climate change, however, these strategies are often too abstract and lack any ideas for implementation, or they are too broad and general. Usually, they remain in utopian and idealistic terms. Not only lacking concrete steps to implementation but often ignoring how actual and effective resistance to this kind of movement will emerge (Albert, 2022).

If looked upon with more detail, Ecosocialism (and its many branches and sub-categories) can be found to focus on the priority of use-value over exchange value – that is, gives value to things according to their usefulness, rather than their value in the market - they tend to insist on forms of collective property and market-constraining measures and they also tend to look towards a contraction and convergence in consumption levels between the global south and global north, although how to arrive at this point arouses doubts and debates, also a certain level of economic planned is generally regarded as necessary. (Albert, 2022 p. 3). As we will see, degrowth shares some of these points, but it is radically opposed to others.

Now that we know – more or less – what Eco-socialists propose, a logical question would be: “How do we get there?” Well, the answer is not clear, nobody has an extremely serious proposition on how or under which circumstances could a society become fully acceptant of a transition (be it peaceful or not) to an eco-socialist system. Most of the authors do have a clear vision of where they want to get, but nobody seems to have a roadmap to said place (Albert, 2022).

Notwithstanding, some authors give some ideas for achieving transition even if it is not necessarily fully ecosocialist. This is the case of Seht Klein, who in his book “A Good War”, establishes a comparison between Canada’s policies when it mobilized for World War II, and what could be done now, taking into account the differences between both situations, but also the resemblances and the lessons that can be drawn from the experience as well as the key concepts that could be applied to a state-centric approach towards climate transition (Klein, 2020)

He also analyses some of the obstacles to effective climate action, he does put most of the blame on neoliberal ideology, which according to him, reaches all levels of politics and economy, hindering any effective action by favouring big capital interest and solutions to the Climate Crisis. In this regard he compares the lacklustre current economic mobilization to the quick, decisive and swift mobilization Canada underwent in 1939-1940, advocating for massive and state-planned reconversion of the economy. However, he does include concrete and specific steps (compared to most other authors) of what should be done:

“Here then are core lessons we should take from our wartime experience retooling the economy:

- *Spend what needs to be spent — in infrastructure, in training, in new economic institutions and firms, and in contracts — to get the job done*
- *Recognize that an emergency means shifting from voluntary incentives to mandated changes — at the household, community and industrial levels. Use regulatory fiat as needed to require changes that must happen.*
- *Set clear and ambitious targets, both for the overall economy and for various sectors.*
- *Conduct a national inventory of conversion needs, so that those needs can be matched with production, distribution and training capacity.*
- *Establish and empower new agencies and crown corporations as needed to get the job done. In particular, consider creating at least one crown corporation in each major sector needed for the transition, to ensure a public competitor exists to control costs and prices.*
- *Prioritize and coordinate the use of scarce resources and key inputs for the task of producing what is needed.*
- *Centralize power and coordination as needed, but also liberate and empower local and sectoral leaders to do their part.*
- *Limit household consumption of items as necessary for the transition.*
- *Galvanize and inspire citizens, workers and business leaders, so they rally to the urgent task at hand.” (Klein, 2020 p. 224-225)*

He also defends that Planning on such a massive scale is not only possible but that it is being done, just not by states: *“...major multinational corporations like Walmart and Amazon, as well as government operations like the U.S. Pentagon, are proving modern technology allows for planning and supply-chain logistics coordination on a scale that Second World War planners could only have dreamed of.”* (Klein, 2020 p. 226).

But he also poses the oh-so-dreaded question: Can this be done democratically? He seems to be hopeful about it, although he does not give any arguments to support such hope. But he also does recognise that some of the measures to be taken will have to be imposed (such as carbon quotas or retrofitting buildings to not use polluting energy or heating). He is conscious that, as much as state leadership is necessary for his model, people need to be on board and working hard to achieve the proposed goals, he addresses the issue of rationing head-on, proposing what he considers to be a “fair system”. (Klein, 2020).

Overall, Klein’s work is a guide on how to get a massive Green New Deal done quickly and efficiently because there could be a point made about Green New Deal as being a whole ideology in the making (although, this is not the place to discuss it),

doubts can arise when it comes the time to place Klein in the ideological spectrum. While he is not entirely ecosocialist in his premises or conception of the steps to be taken (or at least he does not admit it to be one), he certainly offers certain ideas that many eco-socialists would agree with state-planning, top-down approach giving lots of relevance to civil society, recognition, respect and valorisation of minorities or non-market solutions, would be included in the list. He also addresses some of the political and economic problems of such a transformation, especially regarding big oil and societal and political resistance, however, he does not address the possible international and commercial consequences for Canada, which (can be argued) would be beyond the scope of his book.

The problem with this kind of approach, eco-socialist argues, is that it may allow the current system to survive with a new accumulation regime and a new set of “green injustices”. They also criticize these kinds of industry-intensive approaches because even if economies transition to fully renewable energy, these energy sources will need massive mineral extraction and several other polluting activities. As well as relying too much on transitory job creation, without really providing a definite model once the transition is achieved. It is believed that this course of action would lead to a bifurcation moment in which degrowth alternatives may have an opportunity to shine (Albert, 2022), (but so may eco-fascist ones, which we will cover later on).

Another issue that we hinted at before and that eco-socialists worry about extensively when talking about state-led processes is that of authoritarianism and a regress of democratic control of the process. And while these authoritarian measures are feared, they are also understood as necessary evils and the focus is put on navigating through those times without losing sight of the objective or incurring abuses. Not to speak of the implications of resource-intensive transitions or the many risks of betting on technology-focused solutions that may take Earth beyond the 2°C limit. (Albert, 2022).

At this point, and as we were saying previously, we may find humanity between two separate and opposite paths. One is increasingly authoritarian, nationalist, and possibly xenophobic or outright imperialistic, the other is decentralized, focused on the smaller communities and their ability to reduce their impact on nature. Of course, there is an

enormous variety of greys, between both, but for the sake of concretion, we will just explore both of them.

The first option does sound dystopian, and somewhat unrealistic. Before delving into Eco-fascism and other green alt-right options, it must be acknowledged that their proposals and basic precepts are not necessarily in line with many basics that the rest of the options that we have discussed, and will discuss do contemplate, however, we will cover it because: *"The more the need for a large-scale green movement intensifies, the more fascists might enter it and the more desperate and scared green activists may fall into their clutches."* (Ross and Bevensee, 2020 p. 24) And, as we will see, this ideology does comport certain ideas that are unsettling and inhuman, but that has been carried out previously and that can be proposed in times of crisis, such as the ones we walk into. And even if eco-fascism may still be out of the mainstream discourse, it is an option that some people are taking with increasing seriousness, hence, why we cover it.

Who would, after all, think that something like fascism could intersect and adopt ecological premises? Well, the fact stands that it does, and it does so fairly well. Let us dive a bit into it, its basic premises, propositions and fitting within the broader panel of “green” ideologies. First things first, where is the connection between fascism, other alt-right movements and ecology? According to a 2020 paper published by the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, the link between the alt-right and ecology can be traced back to Nazism and the concept of *Völkisch*, and its evolution to our times, in which eco-fascism and far-right relations with ecology split into two major sectors: on the one hand you have those smaller, more radical online communities, that have organised to some extent, promote a dogma of violence, ethnic superiority and actively support and encourage terrorist acts (such as that of Christchurch in New Zealand), and another one that is seeping into populist politics, as a more and more young activist that does tend towards right-wing political options become concerned by the current environmental situation (Ross and Bevensee, 2020).

But what are they proposing that makes them so concerning? Firstly, they consider that population causes most of the ecological problems that the world is currently going through, hence going into the Malthusian trope that there are not enough resources to sustain us all and that the answer to the said problem would be to “cull” non-white populations, and in the way avoid replacement by other “races”. As far-fetched and

deranged as this idea may sound, it is true that in times of crisis, some people may start to buy into it. Although, there are indeed many theories and approaches to eco-fascism, creating a sort of cosmos when it comes to defining it. (Smith, J.K. 2021).

Essentially eco-fascism is proposing an authoritarian and violent answer to the climate crisis by applying a Malthusian logic to it, and while this Malthusian approach does remain with degrowth proponents their answer to it is radically different. As for eco-fascism, we will not delve any more into it, be it enough to say that it exists, that it risks infiltrating certain left-wing circles and that it is a theory that must be acknowledged and rebutted as much as possible.

Finally, we will study what will be the main point of this paper and what we consider to be a very interesting (if unrealistic) answer to the climate crisis. Degrowth, defined as

“To begin with, 'de-growth' is therefore no more than a banner that can rally those who have made a radical critique of development (see Latouche 2001), and who want to outline the contours of an alternative project for post-development politics. Its goal is to build a society in which we can live better lives whilst working less and consuming less. It is an essential proposition if we are to open up a space for the inventiveness and creativity of the imagination, which has been blocked by economic, developmentalist and progressive totalitarianism.” (Latouche, 2009)

While this definition seems a bit open-ended and not necessarily very informative, it does look at the base of degrowth, because degrowth goes beyond mere economics, as it requires a deep societal and political change to take root. Of course, and as Latouche argues throughout his book “Farewell to Growth”, degrowth strives towards reimagining our entire economy, so that it becomes more human and so that it can go beyond growth and all the problems that it entails both at the human and at the ecological level (Latouche, 2009).

Socially speaking, Latouche establishes a criticism of growth, as an unsustainable vicious cycle, since the system requires infinite growth and hence infinite resource consumption, all of this on a planet in which resources are finite, also, he criticizes the social impacts of the current society, the damage done by advertisement and the market, and even the current financial system itself. After all, degrowth attacks the very base of

the system itself: growth. He portrays growth as a drug to which we are addicted, always fuelling our addiction with more and more and cheaper things while putting the price to be paid on the environment, future generations, or those in less developed countries (although he also criticizes the concept of development). (Latouche, 2009)

Latouche also answers the idea posed by Eco-fascist, regarding the Earth as being overpopulated and incapable of sustaining us all, he argues that in the face of scarce resources, we should not discuss if there will be enough for us all, but rather how can we share it in a way that is fair to all. (Latouche, 2009)

Following along, one may wonder, what does degrowth entail, exactly? What is the program? To start with, Latouche argues that degrowth is a “concrete utopia”, which is a concept that should serve as a guiding stone, a direction towards which we should strive. He speaks of convivial communities, autonomous and economical, that we would achieve through a cycle of “8 R’s”: re-evaluate, reconceptualizes, restructures, redistributes, relocalizes, reduces, re-use and recycle (Latouche, 2009, p. 33).

But the criticism and the theorization of degrowth do not end or limit themselves to Latouche, in Spain, Carlos Taibo has also taken up the theory and he has brought it into a Spanish context. He follows along with most of Latouche’s criticisms (the value and sense of work, the problems with the high classes, the need for more local efforts...) and he adds some of his own, especially complementing Latouches eight R’s with his critique to the excessive character of our system:

“A esos «re» se contraponen varios «sobre»: sobreactividad, sobredesarrollo, sobreproducción, sobreabundancia, sobrepesca, sobrepastoreo, sobreconsumo, sobreembalaje, sobrecomunicación, sobrecirculación, sobremedicación, sobreendeudamiento, sobreequipamiento...” (Taibo, C. 2009 p. 72)

Additionally, we must mention the many contributions by Giorgios Kallis, whom we will refer to extensively in this work, who has done extensive research in the field of degrowth not only from the field of ecological economy (see Kallis, 2018a, Kallis et al, 2012, Kallis, 2018b) as well in the field of political theory (Kallis, 2020). His contributions and those of ICREA are some of the most recent inclusions in the debate and offer some very interesting insights that we will cover later on in this work.

The theory goes on and on, but to try and have a more or less usable concept of degrowth, let us define it as a movement (or movements, since there are several approaches to the topic), that seeing the current climate crisis, advocates for a solution that changes our whole system towards one that is not focused on materialistic and productivity imperatives but rather to strive towards a local, smaller economy that focuses on satisfying human needs without a constant need for growth or production.

This definition may sound a bit abstract and hard to imagine, however, in the realm of science fiction novels, some scenarios show us a possible future in a degrowth society. That would be the case with Becky Chambers's "A Psalm for the Wild Built", while the story of the book is irrelevant to us, its setting is of interest since it does depict a society that has gone through a full transition to degrowth in which the economy is not linked to profit or money anymore, rather it is centred around the satisfaction of the needs of the people that take part in it. It is not driven by excess but rather by the existence of a very much cared-for equilibrium in the world that it depicts. Humans have rejected half of the planet and live frugal but happy lives, producing what's needed, trade has not disappeared, but it marches at the rhythm that nature and people allow it to. Works are in production, but also in satisfying people's emotional and spiritual needs. And probably, what may shock some of the proponents of degrowth is that this society is deeply spiritual and religious, professing their faith to a pantheon of several gods, associated with several aspects of the natural world surrounding them. (Chambers, B. 2021).

That is a far-off scenario, but not an impossible one, most of the technology employed in it has existed for hundreds of years and the material level of life that we can see is not similar to that which we have in Europe but is neither undesirable since the philosophy depicted simply has other priorities. And while it may be uncommon for an academic text to refer to a fictional scenario when trying to explain something, the truth is that in the aforementioned book, the author gives a very visual example of what a post-transition society would look like from a degrowth perspective.

But that is only the "where", and that is the easy part for most ecological theories, they all have a destination that they want to reach, but often they lack a concrete plan to reach it. Degrowth is no stranger to that problem, notwithstanding that, there are some

interesting aspects and proposals that we will cover in the next chapter, including some specific examples of concrete initiatives and their effects on local economies.

CHAPTER 2: GETTING THERE. THE ECONOMIC PROPOSITIONS OF DEGROWTH THEORIES.

So far, the case has been made that – according to degrowth proponents – the current economic system is unable to both ensure the basic needs of all the people and protect the environment and avoid catastrophic climate change. To avoid such a scenario, degrowth theorists propose a considerable range of possibilities and economic ideas that are intended to transform both society and production towards a post-growth system. In this chapter, we will study their main critiques of the current economic system and their counter-proposals, as well as an example of a current initiative looking at how a degrowth-oriented organization may work.

The first, and maybe most interesting is their critique and proposals regarding the property. Private property, degrowth proponents argue, is the basis of the current capitalist system and is one of the main drivers behind growth since the accumulation of property is what allows it to accumulate and what drives the ever-growing desire to produce more, in such a way that property is a driver only to accumulate wealth and its only use is to produce benefits. This makes property titles dissociate from the resources they refer to (Van Griethuysen, 2012). For example, this would mean that an investor acquiring land to set up an agricultural facility would only expect its farm to generate as many returns as possible, and would make any necessary modifications (i.e, cutting down previously existing trees, draining ponds or turning them into an irrigation system...), without regarding the ecological or social value of the land (i.e the destruction of an eco-system containing important species or the loss of what had previously been a place for the local community to spend their leisure time in).

This, they argue, leads to a vicious circle that only focuses on the progressive enrichment of the proprietary elite and goes against any other values that the property may have. Their counterproposals do not necessarily defend the abolition of the institution and its substitution for possession-only regimes or the return of communal property, but they also propose things along the following lines:

"(1) limiting the scope of the property domain; (2) regulating capitalisation practices; (3) orienting investments, and (4) allocating monetary returns and distributing created wealth. Each of these policies aims to frame the capitalist expansion of property in a way that meets the overall objectives of ecological sustainability and social equity" (Van Griethuysen, 2012, p. 265)

They are essentially limitations to the concept of property as we understand it and focus on adding different considerations regarding the value of a property. While these proposals would entirely transform the concept of property, they do not mean to end with private property completely, they simply advocate to maintain the name and reform anything that makes a property attractive to capitalists. Other proposals advocate for a return or defence of communal property and the strengthening of possession, rather than property. (Van Griethuysen, 2012).

Under any circumstances, this critique is very interesting but it is of particular interest to note that those advocating for the promotion and strengthening of communal lands, would not need to invent anything new, rather (in Spain at least) they only need to visit their local archives and see how each town was managing its communal lands, then just adapt it to current contexts (this, of course, is just a simplification; it is curious nonetheless that some of the answers are essentially a call to go back to pre-industrialisation legal institutions).

Now that we have dealt – if hastily – with property, it is time to turn to another of the most eyebrow-raising proposition of degrowth: Job sharing and proposals regarding work. Since we have been speaking about degrowth, stopping, and downsizing the economy, the reader may be asking the following: But will that not leave many people out of their jobs? Yes, probably, but degrowth proponents bring some ideas on how to fix that as well.

That would bring us back to the issue of work sharing and degrowth proposals for a world in which there are fewer jobs but a stable (or even increasing) population. Here, there seems to be a tough debate amongst those who argue that such a system would lead to more work, and not necessarily a better material standard, since economies will be using less resource and energy-intensive productive methods, more work may be necessary rather than less to compensate for the loss of more efficient but

less ecologically sound production methods. (See, Sorman and Giampetro, 2011) – admittedly, degrowth proponents never argued that a degrowth society would imply living with more (See Taibo, 2009; Latouche, 2009; Thomson, 2011 amongst others). – but the common argument is that such a society would lead to less work and to tasks that are not currently recognised as work getting such recognition, and work becoming less organized (Kallis et al. 2013), it would also mean that there is more time spent in leisure, but it is necessary to keep in mind that in developed societies leisure is a very energy-intensive set of activities (Bilancini and D’Alessandro, 2012).

Returning to the concept of work-sharing, theorists depart from a situation in which there would be fewer jobs to go around as the economy shrinks and the production needs become less and less, unemployment may be avoided by reducing the work hours of workers and getting more people to work. There are a few ways of getting people to do this, but one that is no stranger to public debate is the concept of the 4-day work week, which is becoming incipiently common. Degrowth proponents argue that this would bring an answer to a scenario of increasing unemployment derived from the need to slow the economy combined with technological advances and advances in productivity, and hence less need for workers (Schor, J 2015). While they admit this would be a necessary step, they also admit that some additional measures may be needed, such as Universal Basic Incomes, which are argued to be a necessary tool to ensure the freedom of those not working (be it their decision or a consequence of the systemic changes brought up by the transition), to allow for the basic items needed in life as well as non-paid alternatives to work that help people fill their lives with meaning, since less working hours may mean a reduction in income for workers (Van Griethuysen, 2012).

Regarding basic incomes, several experiments have been made in various countries with varying results, for example, in the case of Finland, while the experiment did not go exceedingly bad (as in, people did not stop working, and generally there was not a societal collapse), the truth is that it is considered not to be feasible at the time being given the lack of proper support and the functional welfare system in place (Kangas, O. 2021) Equally, an experiment in Ontario, found out that recipients of a Basic Income felt physical and psychological improvements from their reception of the money, and became more independent while still working (Hamilton and Muvale,

2019). Finally, some studies in Australia, found that it would be economically feasible only after a significant increase in taxation (Spies-Butcher et al. 2020). However, Universal Basic Incomes are still far from being a globally implementable idea, even if the results on population are fairly positive.

In combination with this idea, the argument could be made that Job guarantees may be interesting and even necessary. Job Guarantees can be defined as "...a policy proposal calling on the government to promise a job to any qualifying person seeking employment." (Unti, B. J. 2015, p. 204). And it seems to work quite well in combination with the concept of work sharing; after all, if we are to find enough Jobs for everybody (or for all of those who desire to work), it would make sense to guarantee said jobs (Unti, 2015). The problem can be found in several of the arguments presented – if one were to understand degrowth as a heavily decentralized and nongovernmental process as well as one that intends to transcend capitalists' logics, of course – is that it would require a strong governmental apparatus to register workers and allocate job postings (at least, the way it is outlined), additionally, if the point is for the economy to shrink and for fewer work-hours to be needed in general (at least in the traditional sense), one may wonder at the coherence of the proposal with some of the other proposals made so far.

Anyway, what is interesting about the idea of work-sharing and all the surrounding debate is the critique of work, degrowth proponents understand work in a much wider sense and criticize the capitalist concept of work:

"A lot of energy is lost in the process of moving or transforming matter what is left is the "useful work" (Ayres & Warr 2009). Athletes or swimmers optimize their technique by minimizing unnecessary movement and contact of their body with land or water, so that all the energy they expend is energy for moving forward and is not lost in friction. They minimize losses and maximize useful work. The same principle applies to the economy. The scale and speed of production is not determined by total work, but by the efficiency with which expended work is converted to useful work." (Kallis, 2018, p. 29)

Essentially, with this, they criticize that the current economic system focuses on generating this "useful" or "net" work, even if there are great amounts of other work

needed to create these efficiencies. By contrast to the nature of “un-productive work”, which essentially refers to all those creative, yet unproductive activities that still are desirable (be it playing with your children, artistic creation or simply going for a walk), or simply put, leisure (On this see, Thomson, 2011, Kallis, 2018 and Kallis, 2012 amongst others)

But the creation of these efficiencies through the employment of technological and technical advances is not without consequence. Firstly, we need to account for the fact that machines can complement the work done by humans by doing parts of it faster or by doing it altogether by themselves. Secondly, the work of a single individual or tool is impossible without the work of many to sustain it and create it (the work to raise and feed a person or to build a certain tool or machine). Taking that into account, even if the machine does the job faster than humans do it when you consider the work that goes into creating and operating the machine and compare it to the work that would be needed to achieve the same thing without the machine, the results can be surprising (Kallis, 2018).

The next key critique and concept that is made to growth and capitalism has to do with money. So far, we have studied two of the key elements of the current economic system (and most systems conceivable): property and work. But there is an essential element, especially for capitalism, we are now going to talk about money. Money, credit really, has received harsh critiques from a degrowth perspective as fueling growth:

"The link to degrowth lies in the role of debt in the issuing of new money. Whereas new public money could be issued without debt, by being spent into circulation, (for example, as quantitative easing for the people, rather than the banking system), money issued through the banking system is always issued as debt; that is, the money must be returned, with interest, to the issuing bank. This creates a huge growth dynamic. If nearly all money is issued as loans that have to be repaid with interest, the money supply has to be constantly expanded through the issue of new debt." (Mellor, M. 2015, p. 208)

In addition, to the critique of money as a vehicle for debt, there is a further critique of money as a store of value, rather than as a mere intermediary. The argument

goes that capitalist money has become both a unit of account and a means of payment, serving also to discharge debts if need be. But what is the problem with this? After all, that is what money is and what makes our system work the way it does, but degrowth proponents argue that money and credit and the whole structure of the financial system make it “detached from the real economy” and at the fault of the cyclical crises that are so characteristic of capitalism (Fantacci, L. 2013).

Hence, their proposals strive along the lines of creating money or value titles that are more in line with the real economy (that is with the local situation and needs of the population). In this regard, there are a few ideas that we would like to analyze, firstly we will take a look at more standard and “typical” economic concepts and then we will explore some less orthodox practices.

The first practice we want to study dates back to inter-war Austria and Germany. Both countries, ridden with massive inflation and general economic pandemonium saw some interesting experiments from which lessons can be drawn. That is the case of the “Stamp Scrip”, a system by which the local government would hire unemployed people and pay them not in money (which was of scarce value and even lower stability), but in a sort of bonds or vouchers that they could use with local merchants and that would remain in circulation allowing for local trade, and then said scrip would be paid by the local administration at face value. This allows for goods and needs to meet each other in a context in which the main way to exchange said goods (paper money), could not ensure said trade, additionally (and most importantly) a tax was imposed on the holding of such currency, to avoid hoarding and promote fast circulation of the currency; despite its arbitrary creation, it is not inflationary because it extracts its backing from the tax imposed on it, (Fantacci, 2013). In a degrowth context, such a system would favour local economic activity and producers (as long as they exist to a certain level) and would also allow for economic exchange without favouring a growth system, since there would be little point in making big expenses or projects (after all, having money is actively creating a cost, not just meaning an opportunity cost). Of course, such a concept can have issues from an investment point of view or from the point of view of making certain projects and infrastructures, however, in keeping coherent with the ideas of degrowth, said projects would then be undertaken only if they are necessary or

beneficial to the community as a whole, not in pursuit of any financial benefit to a concrete actor.

The second idea that we consider of importance for our current argument would be that of “imaginary money”, a concept minted by Italian economist Luigi Einaudi, that implies the existence of two parallel currencies, one used as a unit of account, the other used as a concrete means of exchange and as a means to pay debts. The whole point of this dual structure is to allow the government to adjust by decree the value of the account money (Fantacci, 2013), it is essentially a sort of bring back of the gold standard, with all that it carries. But from a degrowth perspective, it is argued that this would help control the debt since it would balance the interests of creditors and debtors:

"When, as in the previous example, the monetary authority increases the nominal value of the sequin from 5 to 6 livres, it may not increase by 20 per cent (or it may not even increase at all) its value in exchange for goods, but it definitely does increase (and exactly by 20 per cent) its value as legal tender for the payment of all debts." (Fantacci, 2013, p. 131)

This is probably one of the less strong proposals from a degrowth angle, but it is interesting since from today's economy a measure like this would help give some stability to the economy. Its problem, however, is that it would allow for hoarding and that it does not remove debt (it only stabilizes it). Hence why we do not believe this would be the most impactful proposal, nor would it be expedient in its practice.

The last proposal which comes from an international point of view was minted by Keynes. The idea would be to create a sort of international Clearing Union, in which states have a certain credit based on their exports and imports and can buy and sell from each other based only on said credit, not paying in money but in goods and services (Fantacci, 2013) – admittedly, the differences with money are relative – but, it would certainly help to level the playfield between developed and developing countries, generally, presenting them with the opportunity of acquiring goods and services based on the value of those they offer, without needing to resort to foreign currencies or unfair trade practices.

Generally, all of these proposals intend not so much to completely redefine the financial base of capitalism but to make sure that a firm connection between the real economy and the financial economy exists. Ensuring that debts are promptly paid, and that money is circulating and not being hoarded (and therefore, distributed more evenly, although that is an interpretation that one ought to make), as put by essentially:

"What is at stake is the possibility for the financial system to get back in touch with reality. This will not save us from the ups and downs of the real economy, but it will heal us from the dream of unlimited growth and the nightmare of involuntary unemployment and poverty in plenty." (Fantacci, 2013, p. 144)

The whole idea of such reforms is to make them compatible – to some extent – with current institutions and concepts while ensuring that they allow for the transition that degrowth proponents defend. However, such conceptions are not without danger or critique, as we pointed out earlier this may discourage or complicate the development of necessary investments in infrastructure or R&D, and it also may - depending on definitions of certain values in clearing unions – give continuity to existing global injustices and it is certainly hard to explain, especially from a political communication point of view.

Finally, there is a heavy critique of the market by degrowth proponents, which is why many of the initiatives undertaken by activists looking to work out of the market or beside it. Degrowth proponents consider the market in its current workings to reproduce and encourage the accumulative and exploitative mechanics of capitalism, playing a key role in maintaining inequality and fueling the destructive dynamics of capitalism (see, Latouche, 2009, Kallis, 2018). While there are many proposals (see Froese et al. 2023, for a very complete and exhaustive study of these proposals). In this case, we wanted to look at a proposition that is of particular interest for its disruptive potential and its ability to create deep social connections.

So far, we have only analyzed monetary currencies, which no doubt will continue to exist even in a degrowth context, but other proposals would apply at local levels and that would help create economic alternatives to the capitalist exchange of goods and services. As an example, here we will discuss the concept of “Time Banks”, which is within the concept of “sharing economies”, and as all these concepts, it intends

to allow for alternatives to capitalist practices at a more focused community level (Arcidiacono, 2018).

The concept is quite simple in fact, and some people may snort and say “Hey, I already know that! It’s just neighbours exchanging favours!”. And essentially that is what it is, the idea goes as follows: an organization is created in which people agree to work for X hours, doing a certain thing (say, taking care of somebody’s garden), and in exchange, they receive credit, that they can exchange for an equal number of hours from somebody doing something they need (for instance, helping them manage their taxes). This allows to create of deeper intra-community bonds, favours non-capitalist exchanges, and allows integration of people into the job market by allowing to access different skills, contacts and the general society to those who would otherwise be excluded from it (Hyde-Clarke and Träksman, 2016).

And despite, its seeming simplicity and relatively low skill threshold of the services that may be offered, the fact stands that it has been quite a successful initiative in some places, particularly in Helsinki, where a time bank created in the early 2010s, acquired a very important size and was having a reasonably big effect on the local community. It reached such notoriety, that a tax was imposed on it, which can seem quite contradictory, since such an institution does not generate profit (although, tax authorities argued that the work done by volunteers had a value, depending on the service offered), and also, taxing goes against the principle instilled by time banks that everybody’s time is worth the same (Hyde-Clarke and Träksman, 2016). This is where the revolutionary aspect of these institutions lies, a mere exchange of favours is a thing, but this equalizes everybody, and gives access to otherwise-expensive services to those who cannot afford them on a more typical economical exchange.

Of course, to this tax issue, an alternative was proposed. Since they were not managing money, but time, it would seem to be sensible that taxes were paid in the same currency: *“the principle is when the provider of a service receives time credits, a percentage of the time credits earned are automatically transferred to the account of an ethical economic actor of choice: examples could include a food cooperative, another local CSA, or the Aika parantaa network.”* (Hyde-Clarke and Träksman, 2016 p. 118). This is particularly interesting since it provides a base in which such institutions can

become a broader part of social and economic life and it can help expand its scope, giving them further impact and ability to transform society.

With this last remark, we will finish our brief study of some of the economic alternatives proposed by degrowth. Before going on to the next chapter of this work, some remarks and conclusions would seem to be appropriate. Firstly, the author would like to remind us that these are, by no means, the sole propositions (and some are not even the best or most practicable, although many seem achievable), but they are the ones that best express the critiques to the capitalist-growth systems and its drivers, as well as some of the ones that pose some of the more practical and reform-approachable institutions from a transitional perspective.

Secondly, the common trope of all of the discussed institutions is to stop the drivers for growth (which, from a degrowth perspective would be accumulation and exploitation) and to redefine those institutions so that they become better and more connected to the local community and society as a whole, by allowing people to access either property (or the benefits enjoyed from such a right), more leisure time (this, however, requires from a redefinition of leisure and the activities that it encompasses so it can be made compatible with a degrowth world), or a more stable financial economy (even if less flexible or less prone to saving), and finally so that they can be more in touch with their respective communities and more engaged with them.

These ideas and critiques can raise a few eyebrows and can be a bit hard to picture. That is understandable since they require adjusting to a philosophy that can be somewhat foreign to Western imaginaries (although we will discuss this in-depth in the next chapter). Additionally, some may say: “But this would mean the end of great investments, corporate profits and all the sources of our wealth!” and the degrowth theorist at hand, would smile and answer: “Well, that is precisely the point”. After all, these proposals aim at giving an alternative to a capitalist system, but in such an alternative system these economic basics (property, work, capital and the market), cannot be ignored and require extensive analysis and work to develop both a roadmap on how to reach them and also a solid ideological and theoretical build that allows to put them in place once the time comes or to reach them through progressive reforms.

In this respect, there is a lot of work to be done, but there is also a lot already on the table. There are implementation and technical issues, for sure, but there are also plenty of little experiments going on all over the world (the Helsinki Time Bank is just one example), proving how some of these initiatives may work. Of course, there is always the danger that these projects are somewhat coopted by capitalist practices and end up fueling the system that degrowth criticizes; however, it would seem that even in that case the basic principles and what make such concepts work may be difficult to remove. After all, if an organization is born, not for profit and never thought to make anybody any money, one can wonder if it would even be possible to make it profitable. This debate can probably go on and on, but until we have more and bigger examples of how all these projects turn out and how impactful they become it seems quite risky to give any definite answer.

CHAPTER 3: A POLITICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO DEGROWTH

So far, we have studied the main criticisms and policy proposals offered by degrowth proponents. In this chapter, we will discuss some of the more “philosophical” aspects of degrowth (which we advanced in the introduction) and also, we will see how the debate about a degrowth conception of the state is developing and we will discuss what a coherent degrowth approach to international relations would look like.

When it comes to the philosophical base of degrowth we attend to the ideas of Serge Latouche, as developed by several scholars, but especially by Giorgos Kallis. There are many approaches to degrowth, but these are, by far, the ones that we find to be most coherent with some of the basic values embodied by degrowth. Hence, our first question shall be what are those values?

One of the words that appear in, almost, every degrowth-related text is “conviviality”, which Serge Latouche defines as follows:

“Conviviality, which Ivan Illich (1972) borrows from the great eighteenth-century French gourmet Brillat-Savarin,¹⁰ is designed to reknit the social bond that has been unravelled by what Arthur Rimbaud called the 'horrors of economics'. Conviviality reintroduces the spirit of the gift into trade, alongside

the law of the jungle, and thus restores the link with Aristotle's philia ('friendship').” (Latouche, 2008)

This definition, however, may seem a bit abstract and seems to require some contextualization. By conviviality, degrowth proponents tend to refer to community, to social values that focus on the importance of people getting together. When they speak of “reknitting”, they imply (and very often denounce openly), that the market logic by which Western societies are run has greatly damaged the communities which used to contribute greatly to an individual’s happiness and personal development, and they have been substituted by more individualistic options that – they argue – create a certain feeling of emptiness and disillusionment with the world and society.

In a convivial society, work would not necessarily be done to achieve a certain market output or to promote any sort of accumulation, there would probably be less work (in a capitalistic sense) because people would direct their energies towards different goals. That individual wealth that would be lost from not working to obtain a salary may be regained from the wealth created by the community pooling their resources together. Hence, a convivial society would transcend market and growth logics opting instead, for a community focused on the local and the shared. (Latouche, 2008)

Another value that is shared by degrowth proponents and that is ineffably linked to conviviality, is that of altruism. A society that has transcended growth, will likely be faced with the following situation:

“...If the economic product is going to be smaller, as it will be in a degrowth scenario, the only way to avoid facing scarcity is to share the smaller product, securing conditions that enable everyone to have enough...” (Kallis, 2018 p. 120)

In such a scenario, the only coherent course of action from a degrowth perspective would be to share whatever resources there are in the fairest way possible. Thus the need for a more equitable and altruistic society in which egoistic and accumulative logics are substituted by a more communal approach.

The previous two ideas, make better sense when one considers that degrowth is a movement that aims at promoting change and action at the local level. That “localism” (although, we admit that this word can be a bit charged), is essential to any degrowth proposal since degrowth needs a global network of people promoting it and adding new ideas to its growing theoretical corpus, but it also needs a strong grassroots base to be able to carry out the premises that are considered necessary for the transition that it proposes. Equally, a degrowth society would have to be highly decentralized since most authors promote the need for communities to be autonomous and self-governed. Which in turn means that communities would need to have a very high level of implication by their constituents (Latouche, 2008). We say this because it is at the local level that it is the easiest to both feel the need to take part in political and social affairs and because it is easiest to be altruistic towards those you know, rather than towards those you do not know.

The problem with this set of values is that saying that degrowth defends “autonomous, convivial societies”, does not help imagine or conceive how a state that has completely embraced the idea of degrowth would look like, nor how it would interact with other states. And judging by the research done, the question of the state has only been seriously considered very recently in degrowth literature, the papers that take a deep look and give us some interesting insight into this issue only appeared in 2020 (Kallis, 2020 and Koch, 2020), by which we mean to acknowledge that the following part only relies on few directly related investigations and uses other texts to try and shed some light on the relations of degrowth with the State.

Hence, the first question may seem quite obvious: How do we get there? How does this transition happen? The truth is that nobody has a very good answer to that question, some speak of collapse, some of the peaceful revolution, but nobody has – until recently – given a more detailed and practicable way to such a future. In their latest article, Giorgios Kallis and Giacomo D’Alisa, have argued that while a comprehensive plan cannot be yet devised, the best approach to the State from a degrowth perspective would be Gramsci’s theory of the Integral State (Kallis and D’Alisa, 2020).

They elaborate on this theory, arguing that a degrowth movement will always be impeded by the State as long as the social forces that take part in it are opposed to degrowth. With this perspective, they do not regard the State as a rational and

independent subject rather they defend the State as being composed of civil and political society and being the domain of coercion and consent, hence, this conception of the State transcends the traditional conception of the State (that is, only the official institutions) and considers that the interactions between and political society are essential in understanding the way social organizations work. (Kallis and D'Alisa, 2020)

Furthermore, they consider that States do not keep themselves afloat by sheer coercion alone, they consider that States or their ruling classes need to establish a "Hegemony", which they define as:

"Hegemony is manifested as institutions, procedures and practices, which respond effectively to commonsensical demands and claims of people. The concept of common sense is critical for Gramsci." (D'Alisa y Kallis, 2020, p. 6)

In our case, this hegemony would be the hegemony of growth and the "Common sense", would respond to the developmentalist politics and ideologies that are undoubtedly common in our age. Although, Gramsci uses common *senses*, in plural, since he considers that any hegemony will promote certain common senses to the detriment of others. Equally, they believe that ruling elites will only resort to violence when these common senses cannot be consented to by the peoples being ruled. Therefore, there would not be an "outside" to the state, but everything would be inside the state, be it as part of the civil society or the political one (Kallis and D'Alisa, 2020)

Elaborating on this conception, they defend the creation of a counter-hegemony idea and state by the degrowth proponents. Of course, this will be only the starting point and such a process starts on a more ideological level by convincing certain strata of the population and "bringing them on board", essentially the idea would be not only to carry out and promote the grass-roots actions and policy ideas that we have discussed previously, but also to make sure that a critical mass of people are willing to follow along on those very ideas, and to take part in this parallel economic and social activities so that they will eventually engulf the state and hence not force the transition but make it the natural next step for society. (Kallis and D'Alisa, 2020)

This approach is quite coherent with the ideas and philosophy of degrowth, insofar as it is a peaceful way to achieve the mentioned transformation and to get to a post-growth society and also deals with the resistances that may be posed by certain social groups. It does combine a strong ideological campaign with the acquiescence of society. In some respects, this can evoke the image of degrowth propagating as a sort of “secular religion”, by which people would be first convinced and start to embrace the lifestyle promoted by degrowth and then as more and more people are sort of “converted”, our democratic and representative systems would allow that to be translated into effective policies and political changes. The only issue is that such an approach may take time, and as we have seen, when it comes to acting to mitigate and revert catastrophic climate change, time may be the one thing humanity is lacking the most. Additionally, Kallis and D’Alisa while providing some examples of particular policies in which this has happened fail to provide any comprehensive examples of a new hegemony coming up and substituting the previous one, however, they admit that theirs is only one possible avenue to achieving an effective degrowth transition. (Kallis and D’Alisa, 2020)

This, as elaborated by Koch, would (at least at the beginning) lead to a certain set of policies promoted by the state. And while Koch, does not discuss how a society would get to such a point (Koch, 2020). Such an idea does fit quite well with the perspective adopted by Kallis and D’Alisa and offers a possible next step after the hegemony has been displaced towards degrowth. Koch argues in favour of states transforming themselves through “eco-social” policies, promoting both more ecologically responsible consumption habits as well as economic and political reforms, that are compatible with degrowth proposals (Koch, 2020)

As for the next steps, such as a solid institutional system, the dismantling of the growth economy or the redefinition of the state, including the administration of social services, the maintenance of infrastructures (although, the very concept of infrastructure will probably need to be addressed from a degrowth perspective and a consensus reached when it comes to what kind of infrastructures would such a society need and how they would be built and maintained), are not very well explained or defined, since this debate is in a very early stage.

An interesting point that can transpire from the two articles that we have mentioned earlier, comes from the contrast between the grassroots and bottom-up approach that would be inferred from Kallis' text as well as from the ideas that Latouche develops about relocalizing and activism, and the number of top-down policy proposals that more concrete texts bring up. That is the case with Koch's article, where he looks at several, state-led policy options.

However, this contrast does not mean that these theorists contradict each other. It is a matter of building the reasoning that allows for both things to be compatible with each other. Firstly, to achieve any sort of top-down policy, a certain social and political capital must exist so that said policy can be proposed and passed, said level of support cannot come if there has not been any grassroots action to create a social base. In fact, this reasoning is very much in line with what Kallis and D'Alisa propose:

"a Gramscian model of the state shows that a transition requires a cultural change of common senses through the creation of new alternative spaces and institutions and the generalization of these changes through intervention at the level of political institutions. The two go together. The issue, then, is not, as many in the degrowth literature want it, of going beyond the state or imagining a new configuration, a confederation of communities or else. The issue is how to start the difficult everyday work of transforming the state and laying its foundation anew building first on practices from below and then establishing new institutions. The question is how the self-governing organizations and norms prefigured by those who write about and practice degrowth would permeate the state structure and reshape state logics." (D'Alisa and Kallis, 2020, p. 7)

And really, this conclusion is the most interesting advance when it comes to developing a degrowth theory of the state, because without going into any excessively ambitious prospects. Rather they hit the humble-yet-very-important first question: How to get the process started? We cannot (and would not dare to) provide a definite or solid answer to such a question, since it is beyond the scope of this paper, but certainly, we have studied some activities and initiatives that would seem to be placing the very first foundations of such a transition (see page 28 of this work).

However, there are interesting contributions outside of the degrowth academia that can help us point to certain preconditions and requirements for a degrowth transition. The interest of these views falls upon the contribution that different fields make to the field of degrowth. Particularly, we consider of utmost importance the contributions made by Critical Political Economy, this branch of the political economy, when interacting with degrowth, firstly criticizes the absence of references and considerations for the environment in other branches of political economy (Koch and Buch-Hansen, 2021) and from then on they elaborate both on a possible political economy for a post-growth society and also, more relevant to our study, they study the conditions for a paradigm shift that would lead to a post-growth or degrowth system from a political economy optic (Buch-Hansen, 2018)

In this respect, they define four criteria to determine how feasible would a transition to degrowth be. Some of them we have already studied and seen in this work. The first of which, would be a crisis sizeable enough that would open the door to new systems to be proposed and seriously considered (Buch-Hansen, 2018). We have seen that the current situation of economic, climate and social crises in many Western societies can provide for such a scenario (Gardiner, 2006). Additionally, they consider that degrowth would need to have a solid alternative political project (Buch-Hansen, 2018), once again, this would seem to be the case; as we have extensively studied several authors have proposed integral projects of how such a world would look like, and what their criticisms of their current system are, as well as, more or less depicted their alternatives to the current system (see: Kallis, 2018, Latouche, 2009).

However, Buch also points out another two criteria: the need for support from a social coalition of various actors that believe in the project proposed by degrowth (Buch-Hansen, 2018 pp. 14-18), this, as we have discussed in this chapter, is far from being the case, although, the theoretical foundations are starting to be set (Kallis and D'Alisa, 2020), it is interesting to note that both Kallis and Buch, coincide when they refer to the Gramscian theory of the organic state and the need to create new common senses and a new hegemony. Finally, there is the need to achieve passive consent from a broad majority of the population, and this is no easy task since the ideas of growth and the lifestyle that comes with the capitalist system as well as its philosophy are so broadly accepted and provide for a means of life for so many people that proposals for

such a radical transformation are expected to encounter heavy resistance (Buch-Hansen, 2018).

Hence, we see how political economy can contribute to degrowth theory by helping degrowth proponents find a way to systematically address the state and the transition to a post-growth economy. However, cannot sketch a theory of the state for a post-growth society since the degrowth academia is yet far from reaching a consensus or proposing a specific state model. Instead, we will look at an example of democratic and bottom-up structures, that are currently in use.

Democratic confederalism, which has been proposed by Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party), can be summed up as follows:

"democratic confederalism is a dynamic process of unravelling the state through a process whereby different ethno-cultural communities, self-organised in popular councils and communes, systematically replacing existing state's hierarchical and patriarchal relations of authority with horizontal, gender-egalitarian relations of participatory self-administration. Economically, these horizontal and intersecting socio-political networks are based on communal property relations as the basis of the cooperative and environmentally sensitive production of use-value" (Matin, 2021, p. 2)

This idea can have a great impact and can provide degrowth with a good theoretical base for the post-growth state. After all, most of the elements that he takes into consideration are very much in agreement with the principles of degrowth and their proposals for a post-growth organization. Additionally, what we find interesting about Öcalan's theory is that it has seen some real-life applications with the Rojava in Northern Syria. That being said, and taking into consideration the fact that delving into the intricacies of the Syrian Civil War is far from the object of this work, that includes the difficulties faced by the Kurds and other groups in Northern Syria as they find themselves in a very delicate geopolitical position. We believe that the example is relevant for degrowth because it provides for a working horizontal society and also because it allows us to explore how such a society manages to survive in an extremely adverse regional scenario.

There is a lot of literature regarding the Kurds in Northern Syria. That being said, we will focus on the workings of Democratic Confederalism in this scenario. Everything starts at the smallest local level, the commune. The communes are organized around individual rural communities or based on a certain number of families in urban areas they have great autonomy and can make decisions in most respects, including specific commissions for their administrative roles, eventually, communes get together in quarter assemblies (attended by representatives of each commune), finally, these organisms integrate into Cantons, when it comes to public servants, they do not have salaries and can be removed by the communes and other echelons of the systems, so that popular scrutiny is ensured. And while most administration decisions as well as civil economy are highly decentralized, the only exception being the matters relative to defence and security, which given the context of conflict in Syria are understandably centralized (Colasanti et al. 2018). But there does not seem to be much of an academic consensus regarding the exact functioning of the Rojava, nor the exact pyramid of its governmental structure (Dinc, 2020)

In this aspect, it is interesting to note that Rojava does neither escape the state nor reform it: *“the current model applied in Rojava by the Kurdish movement is a mixture of these two options, or strategies, as the PKK seems not to make a choice between the retreat or engagement: it creates its own alternatives (the councils) while engaging with existing institutions (the municipality)”*. Additionally, they have opted to consider themselves to remain part of Syria, even if they intend to maintain their system. (Dinc, 2020 p. 52). Which is interesting, because usually there is a debate regarding what to do with current institutions, and in this case the solutions seem to have been pragmatic.

Another key issue that the experiment in Rojava brings up, is the role of women and feminism. The project started in 2014 and was openly feminist, it was partly that image of Kurdish women fighting against ISIS that captured the attention of Western Media, but it did not stop at that, there are Women’s assemblies where the women of the commune can deal with “women’s issue”, there are protection mechanisms and generally a conscious effort to try and make women take part in the political process as much as men do. Equally, it seems that there is an effort to integrate various ethnic and

cultural groups coexisting with Kurds (such as Arabs, Assyrians...) (Colassanti et al. 2018).

That being said, the experiment in Rojava is not exempt from problems, both for the experiment itself and when it comes to extracting useful ideas from a degrowth perspective. There is a very adverse international situation, which exposes the Kurdish to many conflicting interests. There is also the fact that the economy in Northern Syria was not as developed as that in the Western world, so probably the economic measures will have reduced interest. Finally, there is the fact of its survival, which cannot be ensured, as the situation in Syria is not exceptionally stable.

There are other existing and past organizations and phenomena that have sought to transform the state and promote alternative modes of living with philosophies close to that of degrowth and to the concepts of conviviality, such as the case of Zapatistas in Mexico, but it would be beyond the scope of this work to analyze them all. An idea that we would like to note is that many of these movements have managed to organize within the state and that they have also developed a way to defend their projects both ideologically and physically (González Casanova, 2005). This can be an important topic of research for degrowth scholars, since every movement is bound to face resistance and attempts to coopt it, hence developing ways to face it and overcome said attempts can become very important.

Equally, another topic that we have not touched upon too much is that of the relations of a possible post-growth state (or political entity occupying its geopolitical space) with the rest of the world. We have ignored this question because of the lack of literature on the issue, and the need for degrowth scholarship to determine whether or not degrowth principles are consistent with concepts such as legitimate defence, international security or international relations, a discipline with which degrowth needs to eventually start interacting and building up a dialogue. These are questions that are still far from being developed and that will likely be easier to conceive once a comprehensive consensus concerning how a post-growth state would look and under which conditions could it arise.

When it comes to a post-growth state in the international arena, the only contribution that we humbly expect to make in this paper comes within the realm of

international relations theory. We would like to propose the hypothesis that from the main theories in International Relations, constructivism is the one that would best help understand how a post-growth actor would behave in the international arena and also it could help write a potential foreign policy, of course, said hypothesis needs of further research and backing in future research. But why do we make this affirmation?

We make this assessment , because despite the many debates and possible approaches to constructivism and its many possible shapes as an analytical tool in International Relations:

"The most basic tenets of Constructivism are the primacy of social facts and meaning. As Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink put it, 'Constructivism ... asserts that human interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors, not simply material ones; that the most important ideational factors are widely shared or "intersubjective" beliefs, which are not reducible to individuals; and that these shared beliefs construct the interests of purposive actors'" (McCourt, 2022, p. 4)

Essentially, Constructivism (or the most mainstream conceptions of it), focuses on the power of ideas and identity to help explain the interactions of international actors. It switches from the focus on power and zero-sum games of realism and neo-realism and from the logic of cooperation and international rules that are proposed by neoliberalism to offer a more socially focused theoretical framework. Hence why we believe that it would be a good fit for a post-growth actor. Since such an agent would (presumably) lack the economical or military power to act according to realist logic (And would, most likely not have a philosophical base to do so either), nor would it necessarily embrace the common norms that a neo-liberal perspective may propose.

This theoretical base will provide a post-growth state with a logical and coherent theoretical apparatus to develop its activities in the international arena and will also provide other actors with the tools to understand its policies and actions. However, these assertions are based on mere speculation, since it is hard to predict what would any post-growth state look like and under which circumstances it may come to fruition. For instance with the example of Rojava that we cited earlier, maybe a constructivist approach can explain some of their decisions but their alliances with certain actors

within the Syrian Civil War can also be explained through sheer realism and pragmatism (for instance, their allegiance to the Syrian State can be explained as a means to retain some support in the face of increasing Turkish pressure and a dormant, but not yet defeated Islamic State).

All in all, what we have presented in this chapter are more questions than answers, we have attempted to present a very succinct philosophical base for degrowth actors, followed by a coherent proposal on how to “conquer” or subsume the state, and its interactions with political economy. We have also presented a practical (if somewhat exceptional) example of how a highly decentralized and democratic system, sharing many degrowth principles may look like, finally, we have tried to establish a degrowth approach to International Relations, a discipline that has been consistently forgotten and that is of great importance since the climate challenge needs to be addressed on a global scale, even if the final solution leads to a highly decentralized global system where everything is done and decided at a local level, the process and the measures to be taken while that objective is achieved, need to be considered at the world level.

CONCLUSION: AN INTERESTING BUT LACKING PROPOSAL

In this work, we have tried to provide a humble picture of degrowth, its current state some of its more important criticism and some of its proposals. The scope has always been to try and introduce an idea that challenges some of the logics of the capitalist system and growth. Degrowth can be portrayed as a utopia and its proponents do not shy away from this term, although they attempt to ground it down by calling it a “concrete utopia”. This utopianism, however, departs from a rather grim vision of the world and the future to come. Since degrowth proponents also consider that the economic, climate and social crises are coming and that the best way to survive them is to rally around their utopian ideal, accept the reduction in material abundance and try to reset our collective mindsets to that ideal.

Admittedly, they do not offer to go back to feudalism and there is certainly an aesthetic appeal to degrowth. The image of small communities where people know and care for each other and in which work is organized around the community’s actual needs and not around some other concept. A society that is egalitarian and that promotes culture and art, in which we would not expect to see much violence and conflict –

although, this is an issue that is oddly not touched upon by degrowth proponents, it would seem that they disregard conflict or fault it entirely on the system – it is an image that many people can get behind, at least on merely aesthetic terms. And that is part of degrowth’s problem.

Certainly, many of degrowth’s proposals are quite unrealistic and far-fetched. But many others are not. We have seen how many of the economic and social initiatives proposed by degrowth or that would be inspired by similar philosophies have been put in place by activists in many places and with reasonable success in some cases (surely, many initiatives are quite new and will require of some time to prosper). Does this mean that we can safely assume degrowth to be a possible thing? Probably the answer does not go that far, these are merely isolated initiatives, many of them in their early years, and all of the successful ones are compatible with capitalism and subject to become coopted by it. But it means that in some places there is an interest to do something different, which does not necessarily mean that the people behind these initiatives are convinced by degrowth, but at least they are disenchanted with the system.

Once again, there is an interesting point in “doing things differently”, which is probably one of the greatest contributions of degrowth as a theory. And truly, what degrowth can certainly provide anybody looking into it, is a healthy revision of their previous ideas about ecology, society and economy. Their critique that growth as a concept is pervasive in all modern ideologies (even those opposed to capitalism), is quite potent because it points out the hegemony of growth, which is so ubiquitous that it is considered a “neutral” concept, and helps to revisit some pre-conceived notions.

That is likely the hardest part about degrowth because it proposes a non-materialistic system, which is a hard sell under any circumstances, but especially so if all previous systems have an intrinsically materialistic foundation. Additionally, it faces obstacles that we have pointed out in the last chapter of this work when it comes to deciding how such a state might look like (if it is even a state, as we know them), what would it be politically or how to get there. We have covered the details, but the questions remain open: Is there a peaceful way to degrowth? Does degrowth condone any sort of violence (e.g. in self-defence)? Can degrowth work within a liberal democracy?

These and many other questions are still in need of definite and feasible answers because so far we have mere speculations. Furthermore, as we were pointing out previously, degrowth needs to seriously consider the international arena. It is very hard to argue for a near future in which all peoples stop believing in nation-states and simply go ahead and live in happy little communes, it is even harder to argue that nation-states will go down quietly. This is an important point to take into account since a possible degrowth state will most likely find itself quite isolated in the international arena, even if its leaders have the best intentions. Such ideologies, threatening established interests will always be endangered by the supporters of the status quo. But degrowth has the added disadvantage that it is hardly compatible with a state model that can wage a modern war or defend itself from economic or political pressures. Luckily, the existing international system is not one where aggression is easily permitted (this assessment may have to be revisited in the coming decade), which may help alleviate some of the external pressures.

But a state having any sort of rivalry, issue or dispute (territorial or otherwise) with a neighboring state may have a tough time transitioning to post-growth if the aforementioned neighboring state was to jump at the opportunity and try to settle that dispute. Additionally, the communities affected may suffer greatly if provisions for their common defence are not made, and even if they are made conflict is always rough on the people suffering it. This is problematic given that degrowth fits very well with neither the industrial and expensive nature of modern warfare nor is it compatible with the concept of war itself. Then again, this is a question that we must leave open since degrowth needs to properly define its relations with the international arena.

As we stated at the beginning, the sole aim of this work is to present degrowth as an idea, with its flaws and virtues, trying to give an image as complete as possible but being conscious that degrowth encompasses a very broad set of ideas, projects and visions, which is only coherent with its localistic and grassroots ideals. There is a clear need for ample research in many topics, and for more practical experience when it comes to grassroots and also to start introducing the degrowth discourse into mainstream political discussions. Overall, we can finish this work by calling to further research in degrowth, especially from different fields that can intersect and bring up

topics and ideas, the relevance of which may have been overlooked in degrowth literature.

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