

THE PARADOX OF  
DEGROWTH

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# What we ought to do to solve our sustainability problems? The debate on degrowth

- Degrowth critics have focused either on its economic or on its political feasibility
- Economic feasibility. A degrowth planet would be so impoverished to be acceptable, even if global GDP growth stops now - not even being reduced - and we redistribute it globally.
- Political feasibility. Degrowth requires moral and social consensus in complex societies - and it is unlikely to be reached in developed plural societies and in developing countries who aspire to material comfort. "Are you invading China to implement degrowth?"

# Taking degrowth seriously

- Regardless of the consistency of the feasibility arguments, degrowth can also be evaluated in another way: by examining the persuasiveness of its arguments.
- Kallis is right when he points out that “the truth or ethical value of an argument does not rest on whether it is politically correct or viable” (2019).
- To take degrowth seriously, I want to examine its core argument – its premises and conclusion and how consistent are with each other.

# Degrowth's core argument

- Since economic growth is inherently unsustainable and makes us miserable, degrowth is the most necessary and desirable solution to our sustainability problems.
- Degrowth assumes two premises
  - 1. Degrowth is necessary - otherwise, human societies would be in danger
  - 2. Degrowth is desirable - simplicity (frugality and sobriety) promote better lives than aiming for material abundance

# Degrowth's necessity

- Degrowth is necessary as it is the consequence of unavoidable biophysical facts - current high entropy and ecologically disruptive societies call human and non human life into question and violate planetary boundaries.
- We need to live in low entropy societies to survive - appropriate technologies, small scale societies.
- We need to adopt ecocentrism to preserve

# Degrowth's desirability

- Degrowth's idea of repoliticization (DeMaria, et. al, 2014). Sustainability is a contentious arena - where different conceptions of the good sustainable life face each other.
- Degrowth is superior to other conceptions of the good sustainable life - it represents the idea of human autonomy (Castoriadis, Parrique, Kallis), understood as making collective decisions free from external constraints (such as the idea of material abundance promoted by advertising or government agencies)
- Therefore, simplicity is self-imposed because we want to embrace it - not because we have no alternative given our current socioecological

# The paradox between both premises

- The idea of degrowth as necessary and desirable is self-contradictory
- Degrowth cannot be the consequence of unavoidable biophysical facts (global energy declining because of the entropy law and the collapse of ecosystems if their integrity is not preserved) and the result of a collective autonomous decision simultaneously.
- The idea of a self-imposed human simplicity should assume that we could act differently if we want so – but degrowth's first premise does not admit this option. Autonomy assumes that we make our own decisions based on our own rational judgements – and that is not possible if democracy, justice and

# How to resolve the paradox?

- Choosing the best elements that degrowth advocates provide to the sustainability debate- avoiding necessity and embracing desirability (politics above metaphysics)
- Self-limitation and human flourishing. The highest human development indexes (above 0,9) require now around 85 gj per capita of energy consumption. Developed countries (like USA, Canada, Australia or NZ) currently double or even triple this threshold with no significant human flourishing value added- even the contrary.
- Ecosystems integrity. The idea of ecosystem integrity has been called into question in recent ecological research - there is no pristine nature that modern humans would have disturbed. This idea, nonetheless, can serve to deliberately preserve ecosystems that articulate indigenous communities' culture and identity (Inuit) and to avoid climate complacency.