



Democracies with a future: Degrowth and the democratic tradition

Marco Deriu

Department of Political and Social Studies, University of Parma, Borgo Carissimi 10, 43121 Parma, Italy

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ABSTRACT

The interrogation of a possible connection between degrowth and democracy inspires some questions of political epistemology. Is degrowth a socio-economic project which can be simply proposed as an “issue” and a “goal” in the democratic representative system, without discussing forms and processes of the political institutions themselves? Is the degrowth perspective fully compatible with the democratic theories and practices as we currently know them?

The perspective of degrowth allows a radical enlightenment of the blind spots of “really existing” democracies but also of the democratic theory. From a factual point of view, we need to acknowledge the existence of an historical connection between economic and political freedoms, since the claim for the autonomy of business has historically been a way to guarantee freedoms and civil rights to citizens, against the tyranny of the central political and religious authorities. Nevertheless, in the current configuration of market societies, the centre of the real power has largely moved from the political and institutional sphere to the economic one. Today the re-foundation of a democratic freedom and of new civil rights should be affirmed against a more and more pervasive economic tyranny. On this basis, a democratic re-foundation in the perspective of degrowth – which includes ecological, social and anthropological challenges – might be imagined.

The second part of this paper will be devoted to the formulation of hypotheses about which foundations might be imagined for a radical reform of the democratic theory and institutions, building on degrowth perspective. From the point of view of the political system, degrowth represents a new “cleavage” if confronted with the historical ones on which classical democracies have been structured. From the point of view of the political organization, degrowth clashes with the traditional competitive electoral models; so I will illustrate some perspectives for a possible reconstruction. From the point of view of a theoretical and institutional re-foundation of democratic regimes, degrowth calls for a philosophical acknowledgement of ecological and social limits, in terms of the institution of a new socio-environmental public sphere which can lead to new constituent processes and to the invention of new deliberative arenas, accordingly introducing different space and time criteria, if compared to the ones we are used to.

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The debate surrounding the theme of democracy and degrowth covers many different questions from the reflections on sustainability and ecological democracy, to the discussion on equality and social rights, and on north–south relations and global justice. Investigating the possible link between degrowth and democracy leads us immediately to questions of political epistemology. To begin with, is the degrowth programme one that can simply be brought into the political–electoral

E-mail address: marco.deri@unipr.it.

arena and proposed to an electorate in normal competition with other programmes? Or does degrowth recall the idea of a wider reconfiguration of the objectives of politics in a well-being society?

Second, does the theme of degrowth represent a reading of conflict and a political view that may be proposed as one “theme” or “objective” among others, simply to be picked up by one or more traditional parties (or possible new parties) without any discussion of the forms and processes of political institutions? Or does the perspective of degrowth imply also the need for a deep reform of the institutions and of the democratic forms of participation?

From an ecological point of view the least that can be said, is that we are faced with questions that have until now been at the very margins of democratic tradition and reflection. As the Canadian scholar Richard Swift affirms “The environmental dimension is something relatively new for democratic thinkers to cope with. Classical democratic theory just assumed a bountiful nature where endless free goods were there for human enjoyment” [1].

After the second world war, for some decades resources seemed to be abundant, growth guaranteed the improvement of working conditions and of social protection systems, and the effects of the impact of the industrial and technological system were not acknowledged as a possible serious threat to ecosystems. In this period of time, political institutions were conceived to maximise the consumption of resources and energy from an environment seen as an external resource rather than a *political context*. Now we find ourselves faced with a world that is “full to capacity” [2], developed, industrialised, urbanised. Today the questions of the impact of our technologies and production processes, our standards of consumption, demographic transformations, and thus evaluations of risk, of self-limitation, and of the responsible assumption of intergenerational duties, impose themselves as crucial aspects of a political rethink.

1. Democracy and the free market

From a social and economic point of view, the question is one of recognising that in western political history the democratic system took shape and was structured through a deep and lasting connection with the institutions of the free market and the logics of progress, growth and development. Timothy Mitchell, for example, in his book *Petrocratia. La démocratie à l'âge du carbone*, has reconstructed from an historical point of view the connection among the exploitation of fossil fuels, the development of a strong trade union movement, and the affirmation of modern democracies and of a growth economy [3].

It may be said that this dependence on the logic of growth regards not only economic institutions but also political institutions. In fact a historical link between the freedom of economic initiative and political freedom can be traced. This is because demands for business autonomy have historically provided a path towards guaranteeing the freedom and civil rights of the citizen against the tyranny of central political and religious authorities (monarch, state, or church). Therefore, from a historical perspective, the emancipatory role played by free economic initiative in the construction of political democracy cannot be denied [4].

It is a fact that the development of democratic regimes, the construction of democratic consensus, is intertwined with the history of growth and the market, of access to and the promotion of consumption. The same imaginary that forms the basis of democratic consensus is historically based on the promise of growth. Social consensus in post second world war liberal democratic societies was founded on the centrality of productive work, an ethic of sacrifice and the promise of “collective upward mobility” [5]. At the same time, the compromise of welfare state which bridled the most problematic effects of free market and assured a strong social integration, made the democratic system more and more dependent on the capitalistic economy through taxation. Nevertheless the fact of having thought of personal and social well-being in principally material terms, and the fact of having confided the realisation of that objective to the market, has had heavy consequences. In fact economic growth has been set above (and conceived as a pre-condition of) any policy of justice and redistribution. But the fact of directing all the efforts and resources of politics towards the objective of economic growth has meant to assign more and more power to the most relevant economic actors.

From this point of view, the present crisis of democracy can be read as the crisis of the centrality of the traditional political sphere and of the prerogatives of the State in its capacity to govern society and economy. We are not in front of differentiated systems, where everyone functions autonomously, but in front of a more and more ambiguous and rampant interpenetration between economic interests and political decisions. In the last decades, we have faced a *translatio imperii* from the political system to other centers of power, especially economic ones: public centers of power, not necessarily democratically ruled (such as G8, World Bank, IMF, WTO, European Commission, OECD, and ECB), or other private and undemocratic subjects (boards of directors of corporations, directions of big banks, big investors, rating agencies, etc.) and sometimes even occult powers. Many relevant decisions for the fate of our future are taken outside any democratic control.

There are different forms of interpenetration of the political sphere by the economic world.

First of all, the big economic actors spend hundreds of thousands of Dollars to support the electoral campaign of a candidate or of a political party in order to obtain laws or decisions favourable to their interests.

At another level, the action is assigned to professional lobbyists. The lobbyists officially registered in Washington are almost 13,000, with a turnover of around 3.50 billion Dollars per year. The ones operating in Brussels are almost 15,000, with a turnover of around 1 billion Euros per year. Certainly, in a democracy it is allowed to represent all the interests, but it is clear that in such a lobbying activity the ones who can count on the higher economic resources have more (legal and illegal) possibilities to get results. In fact there is a strong asymmetry in the possibility to defend the interests of companies and the ones of citizens.

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