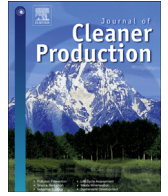




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Economic crisis and social learning for the provision of public services in two Spanish municipalities

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ABSTRACT

Economic crises pose challenges for the provision of public services but may also open up opportunities for social learning about how to achieve a sustainable society. The main research question addressed in this paper is: can economic crises catalyse social learning for a sustainable society? The hypothesis of the paper is that social learning emerges in association with the reduction of consumption levels that follows degrowth or with the reconfiguration of infrastructure management practices and sustainable innovation that could lead to a transition to sustainability. Following this, we empirically examine whether the crisis has led to social learning about the sustainable provision of public services in two similar municipalities in the north of Spain after the economic crisis of 2008. We develop an interpretative analysis of individual experiences of learning from the crisis using a set of qualitative interviews with individuals who were involved in key decisions about public service delivery during or immediately after the crisis. The analysis suggests that there has been a broader cultural change, which is challenging institutional models of regional development, that there has been a drive towards greater resource efficiency and that some opportunities have opened for entrepreneurs to develop sustainable innovations. The findings support the view that the crisis may have fostered learning responses that could lead to either degrowth or a sustainable transition.

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1. Introduction

Can learning from shocks foster a transition to a sustainable society? Agrawal (2011; p. 291) has argued that “disasters are a natural ‘reset button’—what happens in their wake is shaped by historical forces, to be sure, but they also enable greater leveraging power to new resources, fresh endeavours and innovative institutions because older structures and processes lose at least part of their historical force”. He highlights the example of poor communities in Honduras that initiated institutional change after Hurricane Mitch. This change led to more equitable land distribution and a reduction in the rate of forest conversion (McSweeney and Coomes, 2011). Do similar processes of social learning follow an economic crisis?

An economic crisis is often understood in terms of falling GDP, lack of capital liquidity and high inflation or deflation. However,

crises are also multi-dimensional processes that, in turn, lead to difficult decisions regarding the use of limited resources, which affect people's quality of life and livelihoods. Barbier (2011; p. 65) argues that the combination of a fuel and commodity crisis since 2007 and the financial crisis in 2008 have created the right conjuncture for strategies to overcome ecological scarcity in the world economy. This requires social learning—that is, collective forms of learning that lead to broader changes in the organisation of societies and their relationship with ecosystems and technologies.

Social learning occurs when social actors reflect on their values, assumptions and policies, and through such reflection they are able to activate a process of collective change (Reed et al., 2010; Castán Broto et al., 2014). It emerges in relation to joint knowledge production (Hegger et al., 2012). It is also a process that leads to collective decisions, where consequences are shared so that knowledge accumulates as part of the collective memory (Plummer and FitzGibbon, 2004). For learning to foster change, it should lead to a form of knowledge that enables the re-examination of ongoing collective actions, their consequences and their potential for change. Thus, social learning is often thought of in terms of learning

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loops: single loop refers to learning that corrects errors from routines; double loop refers to learning that re-examines values and policies; and triple loop refers to learning that develops new institutions (Keen, 2005). Triple loop learning requires moving from thinking about whether we are doing the right things to redefining what is 'right' to achieve structural change (Flood and Romm, 1997). This last aspect is central to determining the potential for radical change because it requires both successful innovations and a reconfiguration of structural barriers along with the generation of new institutions for new ways of thinking and acting collectively (Pahl-Wostl, 2009).

Thus, if an economic crisis makes visible the resource foundations of the economy, can a crisis also facilitate a process of social learning for a transition to sustainability? In this paper, we investigate this question in relation to infrastructure for public service delivery. Infrastructure is the socio-technical system that mediates the provision of public services supporting society and the economy. We look at infrastructure in relation to debates on the reduction of resource consumption through degrowth, on the one hand, and on the role of environmental innovation in transitions to sustainability, on the other. In this paper, we find that economic crisis may provide an opportunity for learning in relation to cultural change, new practices in the use of resources and the emergence of sustainable innovations. The extent to which this contributes to a fundamental change or transformation, however, is not clear. Our findings are supported by empirical evidence from an interpretative study of learning experiences from crisis in two towns in the north of Spain.

2. Infrastructure reconfigurations and social learning

Social learning questions the hegemonic norms, values and conventions that mediate human interactions and exchanges. As economic growth is the dominant economic imperative—shaping both society's perceptions of human welfare and the attempts to attain it—an institutional change of the kind we advocate would entail situating infrastructure within the context of an alternative paradigm, for example, degrowth and economic contraction (Schneider et al., 2010). In terms of reconfiguration of material and technological systems, social learning refers to the establishment of new relationships with infrastructure, thereby gaining the capacity to alter their material disposition and uses through the introduction of sustainable innovations (Boons et al., 2013). These are two interrelated ways of thinking about sustainable transitions in infrastructure to which we turn in the next two sections.

2.1. Social learning as cultural change: enabling degrowth

Degrowth proponents are concerned with the material limits to the economy and our ecology, and thus, they argue for the contraction of economic processes to protect future resource scarcity. Degrowth is defined as “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term” (Schneider et al., 2010; p 511). Sustainable degrowth, however, is not associated with a total contraction, but rather with the preservation of social services and quality of life through cultural change that aims to maximise happiness beyond societies' current associations with material consumption.

Degrowth debates are linked to debates on sustainable consumption (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013). Matthey (2010), for example, has focused on the issue of whether, as a collective society, we can change our aspirations to consume less. Social learning is regarded here as a matter of influencing multiple individual choices, which collectively may lead to a reduction of consumption levels.

Similarly, Hamilton (2010; p. 571) argues for a process of cultural change towards ecological consciousness and that such process “will depend either on severe environmental shocks or, one can only hope, a widespread change in the process of self-creation induced by a collapse of public confidence in the consumer life”. To an extent, this envisages crises as events that allow individuals to reassess their aspirations and personal identities. Economic crises do indeed lead to a reduction of consumer confidence and overall rates of consumption, but maintaining lower levels of consumption would also require changing consumer aspirations.

However, the type of cultural change required for degrowth requires a reconfiguration of the nature and context of consumption. Degrowth entails a simultaneous cultural and material rearrangement that would ensure its long-term viability. This means a cultural change that questions the type of society where we want to live. This cultural change goes hand in hand with re-envisaging the economy away from the marketisation of commodities, looking instead into the possibilities of non-profit and cooperative forms of social economy (Johanisova et al., 2013). While such reconfiguration is predicated on the need to question neoliberal approaches to understanding and managing the economy, it is most often located not on centres of decision-making, but within citizens who actively respond to the demands of a sustainable future. Social learning is key to building citizens' trust in new governance systems for degrowth (Domènech et al., 2013).

What role could a crisis play in a cultural change towards degrowth? On the one hand, the crisis can be a means to expose citizens to degrowth. Experiences of crises in Cuba, for example, have led to a situation in which people are fed with fewer fossil resources, while providing labour-intensive employment, with a range of social benefits, including social inclusion and health benefits, but at the expense of people's sense of hope and trust in the system (Borowy, 2013). Gaining trust also requires meeting people's collective aspirations of a good society. However, aspirations can change. They are a specific cultural-historical construct (Schneider et al., 2010), structured by institutions—and material objects—that shape attitudes and orientations towards life (Hamilton, 2010). The crisis can expose those collective aspirations, and change them. In this way, the 2008 crisis raised critiques not only about the sustainability of the current economic system but also about the suitability of associated political and social systems (Juknys et al., 2014). The question is whether citizens can move from a critique of the status quo to social learning for change. Whitehead (2013), for example, emphasises degrowth as a strategy to realise 'radical communitarian approaches' to urban living. These imply strategies regarding local economic welfare that focus more “on quality of life, the provision of good, wholesome food and time for family and friends, rather than on economic growth *per se*” (North and Longhurst, 2013). Urban approaches to radical sustainability such as these focus on grassroots mobilisation as a way to change perspectives and cultural practices but also to influence the generation of new institutions and policies. A crisis will lead to social learning for degrowth if it can create a broad cultural change, most likely through grassroots movements, and generate new institutions to regulate more sustainable socio-ecological interactions.

2.2. Social learning as socio-technical reconfiguration: infrastructure transitions

From a socio-technical perspective, the quest for sustainability does not reside in the development and implementation of a silver-bullet technology or even a range of technologies. Rather, the technological change required to achieve more sustainable

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