

A REVIEW ARTICLE BY MIRIAM LANG¹

Degrowth - Unsuitable for the Global South?²

This article offers an in-depth overview of the major discussions developed in the Fifth International Conference on Degrowth that took place in Budapest in September 2016. The conference gathered activists and academics committed to social transformation.

Hegemonic common sense suggests that a project as exotic as controlled economic degrowth is at its best applicable only in the geopolitical Global North while for the South, economic growth would be a requirement. Despite this, more and more voices are questioning the arguments that give economic growth a central place in political discussions, suggesting that this type of criticism could be liberating for many parts of the world (Max-Neef 1995; Latouche 2010; Altvater 2013; Muraca 2014; Gudynas y Acosta 2014; Lang 2016). The fifth international conference on degrowth that took place in Budapest, capital of Hungary, between the 30th of August and the 3rd of September 2016, revealed that reflections around degrowth are also a place of convergence for multiple transformatory narratives: from political ecology to ecological economics, considering also feminist perspectives that suggest the organization of society around a logic of care; from ideas of environmental and climate justice to policy ideas of universal and unconditional basic income. In this way, degrowth constitutes an additional contribution from a new internationalism, a contribution that seems necessary for interventions from the plural left over the globalized world. This internationalism is not limited to solidarity practices in struggles that take place in faraway places, but instead, it looks for convergence, as well as

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complementarity and reciprocity between transformatory struggles that are contextualized and diverse.

Six hundred people from Europe and from other continents participated in this academic event at the Corvinus University in Budapest. The Degrowth Week took place in parallel to this event in different parts of the city, open to the Hungarian public and presenting a high level of attendance. The Degrowth Week had as its purpose to show how degrowth can be put into practice. For example, it included the distribution of still edible groceries that hotels, supermarkets, or big businesses throw away to the numerous homeless people of the city. This is a task carried out by the organization Budapest Bike Mafia that combines social justice with a struggle against waste production in modern capitalism. Another example are cooperatives that bring farmers' products to the city, that not only sell their products at a fair price, but that also offer catering services and organize courses about how to produce marmalades and other preserves. This is an example of traditional knowledge that has been increasingly lost since the violent introduction of capitalism to post-1989 Hungary.

Eastern Europe: degrowth in the semi-periphery

The degrowth conference not only allowed discovering and supporting an unknown Hungary that remains hidden behind the authoritarian and xenophobic figure of Victor Orbán's government, but also invited to reflect about the current state of Eastern Europe, understood as a semi-peripheral region. While Eastern Europe shares many aspects with Latin America, it remains virtually invisible in our debates as well as in the debates of core countries of the capitalist world system.

Yet, the connections have always been present. In the conference, Szandra Koves from Budapest asked: "How can we talk about degrowth in a region that looked with jealousy to the consumer possibilities of the western world, when it was part of the soviet block, and that associated consumerism with freedom?" Koves recalled the long queues where she had to line up when she was a little girl just to obtain a few plantains

or oranges, whenever a shipment from these exotic products occasionally arrived from Cuba.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the development discourse began to colonize minds in the region establishing as the goal to reach the level of capitalist development of the neighboring country of Austria. Today, 25 years later, these narratives are crumbling for the younger generations. Hungary suffered from a severe crisis around the year 2008 to which the social democrat government responded with drastic austerity measures and violent repression. Until then, Hungary had not experienced state violence since Stalinism crushed the 1956 popular uprising with military tanks. Today, it is clear that “Austria is not the panacea that they made us believe—it was all a mirage,” clarified in the conference the Hungarian Economist Zoltan Pogatea.

Making visible the ‘*mal vivir*’³

The degrowth movement’s dissatisfaction with the Global North’s lifestyle is evident. This lifestyle, however, is usually portrayed as the goal of development, the *locus* of self-realization. However, this accelerated life rhythm is suffered even by those who have had the privilege to be included into modern capitalism. It is often leading to burnouts, depression, and physical diseases that are rooted in high levels of stress and that are reaching epidemic dimensions (a fifth of Germans suffer from anxiety in ways that prevent them from having a normal life; in the US, two thirds of the work force, more than 45% of medical doctors, and almost 70% of finance professionals have

³ Note from the Translator: A literal translation of the expression ‘mal vivir’ in Spanish, would be ‘bad living’. However, in Spanish, its significance goes beyond that. ‘Mal Vivir’ makes a clear reference, and opposition, to the debates on ‘Buen Vivir’ or Good Living, that have dominated discussions of development and political ecology in Latin America over the last decade. Overviews of these ideas have proliferated in academic and policy circles. See earlier articles in *Alternautas* on these issues such as: [Waldueller \(2014\)](#), [Guardiola & García Quero \(2015\)](#), [Beling & Vanhulst \(2014\)](#), [Chambi-Mayta \(2015\)](#) or [Iamamoto \(2015\)](#).

suffered burnouts);⁴ the US and France are amongst the populations with the highest levels of depression in the world, while Japan and South Korea lead the ranking of suicides per capita.⁵ Degrowth debates include discussions about the negative consequences brought by the exacerbated competition and individualism prevalent in today's social relations – a distress caused by the desire of transformation. These debates include discussions about the consequences of an exponentially increasing inequality that prevents many from participating in the promise of consumerism. A big majority of those who migrate to the North, in spite of the discrimination and social exclusion that they experience, often tell stories of success and happiness to their families back home. So powerful is the narrative of development that it even encourages these migrants to lie to their relatives and close friends. The individual adjudication of responsibility for failure, in a context plagued by structural adversities, results in personal shame and loneliness. This is the other face of the “American dream”.

In her intervention, the Croatian political scientists Danijela Dolenec argued that Eastern Europe is experiencing today the violence of this dual narrative; a narrative that confronts Western Europe and liberalism with traditional societies, which are supposedly doomed to disappear. Instead of learning from the not-so-orthodox Yugoslav Socialist experiences that were lived under the rule of Josip Broz Tito, for example, these experiences remained invisible in the years that followed the fall of the Berlin wall. “The socialist project was represented as a gigantic aberration in the way to modernity”, Dolenec argued. Today, at least in Croatia, this hegemonic view is breaking down in the midst of a crisis and a new generation of young intellectuals is looking for other ways out. Under the debris of the Yugoslav wars (1991-2001), other ways of life can be found that have the potential to inspire the construction of

⁴ Ninck, M. (2015) 'The German Workforce Has a Burnout Problem' *Business Journal*, available at <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/184106/german-workforce-burnout-problem.aspx>; Statista (2017) 'Stress and burnout - Statistics & Facts' Available at <http://www.statista.com/topics/2099/stress-and-burnout/>

⁵ The Economist (2007) 'Jobs for life' available at <http://www.economist.com/node/10329261>; McMillen, M. (2011) 'Richer Countries Have Higher Depression Rates' available at: <http://www.webmd.com/depression/news/20110726/richer-countries-have-higher-depression-rates#1>

alternatives. For example, there is a wealth of practical experience (negative and positive) related to self-management at difference scales and there is also a “socialist culture” of time that cannot be understood through the lens of productivity pressures and that allows for conviviality. This is also seen in the resilient persistence of exchange and production practices directed at self-consumption and barter that take place outside of the market realm. To conclude, Dolenc stated that the left is confronting today two fundamental challenges: the construction of policies of equality that are neither productivity-oriented nor extractivist, and the development of social alternatives that assign a central place to the creation and recovery of the commons, that underscore care as an axis of human coexistence.

The South is not obliged to just grow

The conference highlighted the need to deconstruct the myth according to which it is first necessary to reach certain level of welfare (understood in the hegemonic discourse as the proliferation of capitalist relations in the way of life) and only then it becomes pertinent to pay attention to gender issues, environmental sustainability, etc. Multiple panelists, such as the ecological economist Clive Spash, stated that economic growth is not the solution for the Global South either: this economic model mainly produces inequality and “*mal vivir*” transforming cities into polluted monsters and turning relatively self-sufficient rural communities into dependent ones. It is necessary to understand, Spash stated, that the material wellbeing of a minority that has managed to climb up the social ladder to the middle class is only possible at the expense of a majority of the population that remains in poverty (Spash 2017). This intensifies what the political scientist Ulrich Brand from the University of Vienna denominated “the imperial way of life”: a way of life that takes for granted the unlimited access of a small minority of people to the planet’s resources as well as the planet’s capacity to absorb waste and pollution (Brand 2013). This way of life can clearly not be expanded to include all the population of the South. Instead, it requires an outside from where cheap labor and raw materials can be extracted and where waste can be disposed of. While this way of life expands throughout the planet,

the planetary crisis and the competition for access to resources between countries becomes more acute, for example, between the old capitalist centres and emerging countries such as China and India. The result is a perverse struggle around the so-called “right to pollute”, as exemplified by the COP conference on climate change.

The idea is not to impose the concept of degrowth to the Global South as a transformatory proposal originated in the North, as it has often happened with regards to knowledge production. Rather, as suggested in the book *Degrowth – a vocabulary for a new era* (2015) written by Giorgios Kallis, Federico Demarúa, and Giacomo D'Alisa from the Barcelona Research & Degrowth group, it is about opening a conceptual space for countries and cultures in the South to find out what they consider to be a good life. Degrowth is not only about politicizing sustainability, as explained by Federico Demarúa in Budapest. Its emphasis is not only in *less* but also in *another way*: in addition to intervening upon the flux of metabolic matter in the planet, it encompasses a different vision of how social relations should be organized, oriented for example by the ideas of *conviviality* of Iván Illich (1973) and by alternative narratives of good life. According to the Italo-German philosopher Barbara Muraca (2014), the degrowth transformation must touch the social, institutional, and mental infrastructures, that is, the subjectivities that are oriented towards linear growth as produced by capitalist modernity.

The pioneers of degrowth are scholars from the 1970s such as André Gorz and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (Gorz 1991; Georgescu-Roegen 1979). The concept regained relevance first in Western Europe at the beginning of the new millennia fuelled by the work of the French scholar Serge Latouche (2010). Nowadays, there is a broader and diverse degrowth community whose more important loci is located in Germany, Spain and France, but also represented by the anti-authoritarian movement in Greece that emerged from the crisis, and by various collectivities and experiences in Italy, Switzerland and Canada.

How to establish limits and respect them: the intersection between ecology and democracy

In his intervention, Giorgios Kallis from Greece warned of the dangers of the discourse known as “respecting the limits” (ecological limits, the limits of the planet, etc.) by taking into consideration the ideas Garret Hardin’s (1993) *Living within limits*, author also of the famous book *The tragedy of the commons* (1968). In order to reject the idea of unlimited migration Hardin relies on a scientific equation to establish a set of targeted ecological limits for a given territory. He establishes the notion of migrant “absorption capacity” in a particular national territory – a very heated current debate in Europe and in the United States. Kallis refuted the metaphor of the boat in the sea that is forced to avoid saving more people because of the risk of sinking. The limits of the planet are global, or at most, they are eco-regional, but they do not obey to the logic of the nation state, Kallis continued. What really influences ecological capacity is not so much the absolute quantity of people but rather their way of life, the qualitative aspects of life. Besides, migratory flows to core countries tend to reduce fertility rates. Thus, “instead of closing borders we have to understand the factors that lead to population increase” said Kallis, who like most part of the degrowth movement, rejects the biopolitical control over women’s fertility as a way of intervening in population rates.

The debate about who establishes the limits and how they are delineated is however very complex. The answer is located at the intersection of ecology and democracy because these limits are not merely clear-cut objectives to follow, but rather, they are established through political and social deliberation. Who has then the authority to establish these limits and implement the necessary policies to enforce them? Do we have to rely on a handful of scientific experts that use mathematical projections and equations that are often questionable? Would this not lead to some sort of eco-dictatorship that could not possibly bring a solution? Alternatively, do we rely on the figure of national governments who have repeatedly proven to be incapable of carrying out this task, as shown by the climate change conferences? Or is it maybe the responsibility of society as a whole? If yes, under which mechanisms? This leads

to the question: What are the necessary criteria to democratize the societal relations with nature?

The role of the State in the transformation: an open debate

In Budapest, like in other places of the world where the multidimensional transformation of our societies is discussed (for example, transformations related to class, race/coloniality, and gender dimensions, as well as our relation to nature), it was highlighted that one of the greatest challenges of the degrowth movement is to understand the role of the state in this transformation. Recent Latin American experiences have shown the relevance of something that was already known in Eastern Europe: that the State as a privileged actor of transformation ends up reifying relations of domination and stabilizing processes of capital accumulation, instead of transforming them. The State, as a product of social relations, reflects the power struggles that exist in our societies today without fundamentally changing them. Instead, the state often transforms the transformers demanding them to respond to certain rules and logics that are characteristic of state institutions but that obstruct transformational processes.

At the conference, this was the topic of a forum about institutional transformation that explored, for example, the experience of the current municipal government of Barcelona. There, a coalition of social movements and leftists parties took control in 2015 under the leadership of Ada Colau, an activists of the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH, for its acronym in Spanish). A study carried out by Viviana Asara showed the great challenges that emerge once these projects enter the institutional sphere: lack of deliberation, the danger of delegating responsibility to elected officers, and the difficulty of maintaining collaboration with them, given the relentless pace of governing. In another example, the Greek experience also revealed the limits of top-down transformational processes after the betrayal of the 2015 anti-austerity referendum democratic results. Danijela Dolenec argued that this revealed the fact that Europe is in a post-democratic context, as defined by the British political

scientist Colin Crouch (2004). Under these conditions, is it possible to think of bottom-up type of transformational processes that ignore the state?

For Ashish Kothari this approach seems to have worked for some social movements in India. They have decided to ignore the central government at the regional level and to establish strategies of self-governing. Kothari described the impacts of development in India as violence: hundreds of millions of people have been separated from their livelihoods (means of life or sustenance) to enter the labour market. “The need to find employment is just a tale that obscures other existing ways of living,” Kothari stated. As a consequence, people in rural India today eat less than 40 years ago, air pollution kills half a million people annually, and millions of peasants commit suicide every year (more than 18.000 only in 2004). According to Kothari, the various processes of rural revitalization and eco-regional self-governing that have emerged are alternatives proving that rural-urban migration flows are not inevitable. Instead, many people in India are returning to the countryside in regions where they can now find dignifying living conditions. These alternatives are based on the concept of *swaraj*, which was established by Mahatma Gandhi and associates self-control with the freedom, not only of the self, but also of the rest of the community.

In the debate, feminists asked if returning to more traditional ways of living would come to the detriment of women’s autonomy and freedom. Given the enormous cultural diversity and wealth of traditional ways of life, as it was mentioned before, sustaining this would be shortsighted and such an affirmation would assume that the capitalist/modern way of life has effectively freed women, an assumption that was criticized by many of the participants.

Technology: a problem or a solution?

Another aspect that was left open in the conference was the role of technology in the transformation. While the adepts of Green capitalism state that the environmental crossroads at which humanity has arrived can find a solution through technological means, Tomislav Medak from Croatia called this idea into question. His first argument points at the structural inequality with regards to technological

development that exists between the North and the South: in the South, the reduction of costs in the extraction of natural resources and labour still relies on the use of less-advanced technology, in an attempt to externalise the costs. Green capitalism is not a global solution because it can work in a country or a region of the planet but only to the detriment of others. His second argument is that technological innovation usually addresses problems posed by existing systems. This means that it is very difficult to develop technologies that are completely decoupled from production, and yet, this is exactly what a degrowth based society requires. How to prevent collaborative technologies from being reduced to circuits of capital accumulation?

The conference of Budapest, of course, did not offer answers to all the challenges faced by the transformational process towards a degrowth society. Important elements to this process include: a radical diagnosis of our current situation, the construction of a set of orienting principles, as well as the visibilization of spaces for social experimentation that exist at the margins of European societies. However, what is more pressing is the construction of strategies that help to expand the degrowth perspective throughout society in ways that allow for a real emancipation from the coercions of capitalism.

Degrowth and Latin America?

As argued by Eduardo Gudynas in various places⁶, the notion of degrowth in the Global South amounts only to a provocation. For this reason, the Uruguayan ecologist thinks that the idea has low power of mobilization. The hegemony of the development/underdevelopment dichotomy is still deeply anchored in Latin American social and collective imaginaries. However, the degrowth provocation – for which some authors have considered the notion as “palabra-obus” (Ariès 2005) – is in fact part of the strategy of some of its activists, also from the North. They seek to dislocate and motivate discussions, invite to reflection and open spaces of debate that

⁶ See for example, Gudynas’ intervention here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJ5Bae641oA> - (Note of Translator: Gudynas has also published in *Alternautas* before on this issue, see [Gudynas \(2014\)](#)).

go beyond the guidelines drawn by the imperative of growth, development and progress. In Latin America, the paradigm of “Buen Vivir” opened fields of debate that call into question the hegemonic notions of welfare and the good life, as well as the predatory relations with nature that are imposed by the capitalist/modern/western pattern of civilization.

Today, it is clear that the type of development that encourages the Global South to imitate the path of the North cannot lead to welfare but to socio-ecological collapse. In this sense, the societies of the South also need to have a debate about which economies should grow and which ones degrow – or in a more radical way, ban economic growth as a universal parameter.

In practice, in Latin America multiple experiences correspond in various dimensions to those associated to degrowth in the North. In Spain and other European countries many people are returning to the countryside to what were previously abandoned towns. Many people are also recognizing the advantages of living a rural lifestyle that is partially self-sustainable, in the context of the eco-village movement.⁷ These people are celebrating their independence from the State and from the services that it provides and are experimenting with alternative ways of conviviality, free education, etc.

In Latin America, many communities are resisting the expulsion out of the countryside – an encroachment carried out by infrastructural mega-projects and projects linked to extractivism. They are revalorizing agricultural production and subsistence production in their discourse as well as local and regional commercialization, local practices and cosmologies, and the possibility to have a harmonic relationship with nature. These communities seek different levels of autonomy from the state, depending on the context and based on their own ways of living, knowing and educating. They are focused, although they not always put it in these terms, on the recovery or preservation of the commons, the construction of a balance with the natural surroundings, the valuation of conviviality and care, and a

⁷ See another example in the ‘Rodando el Cambio’ documentary, on the Eco-villages movement, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZT14cOZVDmA>

paradigm of welfare that is at the margins of consumerism, liberal individualism, and capitalist logics of accumulation. This is exemplified by experiences such as the ‘*Congreso de los Pueblos en Colombia*’ (Houghton 2015), experiences of indigenous autonomy in Bolivia (Exeni 2015), and the *comunas* of Venezuela (Freitez y Martínez 2015), as well as the Zapatist autonomous region in Chiapas (Lang 2015). In a way, while in Europe attention is focused on the recovery of similar spaces, in Latin America we are still concerned with their preservation from capitalist advances. The ideas discussed in Budapest are a good basis, without a doubt, to debate different concepts and perspectives from where to build North-South alliances.

See more information on the conference and the Degrowth movement in general in here: <http://budapest.degrowth.org/>

<http://www.degrowth.de/es/blog/>

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